

Countering extremism under a state of emergency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Natural disasters are increasing in intensity and frequency. According to the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) more natural disasters are forecast in our future due to increases in global surface temperatures.¹ Frequent and concurrent disasters and emergencies have occurred in Australia since 2019, including bushfires, the COVID-19 pandemic and repeated floods. Alongside evidence that natural disasters are increasing, there has been an unprecedented spread of mis/dis information around the origins and impacts of these natural disasters and emergencies.² Mis/dis information at scale are contributing to greater societal polarisation, distrust in democratic governments and institutions, the erosion of community cohesion, and are increasingly playing a part in extremist narratives and appeals. They also undermine disaster and emergency response and risk communications.³

With increasing natural disasters comes more frequent states of emergency and states of disaster declarations where democratic governments invoke emergency powers. States of emergency in democratic contexts are meant to be limited and short lived to deal with an immediate crisis. However, when they are invoked more frequently, even if by necessity, they play into the narratives of actors who claim they are a method of subjugation rather than a form of disaster response.

Distrust and distortion of state of emergency declarations are also part of a broader decline in trust in democratic governments. There are persistent trust deficits within Australian democracy. Surveys like the Edelman's Trust Barometer, the Ipsos "Broken System Index" and the Scanlon Survey on Social Cohesion demonstrate persistent sentiments of distrust in democratic governments, reveal broken systems thinking, and challenges to social cohesion.

1 UN Office of Disaster Risk Reduction, (2020). *Human cost of natural disasters: an overview of the last 20 years 2000–2019*, Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, <https://www.undrr.org/publication/human-cost-disasters-overview-last-20-years-2000-2019>.

2 Cinelli, M., et al, (2020). "The COVID-19 social media infodemic," *Scientific Reports*, 10:16598, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>

3 Hansson, S., et al, (2020). "Communication-related vulnerability to disasters: A heuristic framework," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 51, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.101931>

Findings on the effects of natural disasters on terrorism, political violence and civil unrest in previous decades revealed that the effect was concentrated in conflict-prone countries with low to middle GDPs. Countries with higher GDPs did not experience the same increase in terrorism, political violence or civil unrest following a disaster or emergency. It was assumed that richer and/or democratic countries were more stable and had more resources to effect disaster recovery and maintain security. However, we can no longer assume that high GDP economies and established democracies will retain these protective factors. Democracies around the world are experiencing yawning inequality gaps, democratic backsliding, and are facing increased economic pressures. The concurrent natural disasters from 2019 to 2023 in Australia, particularly the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, clearly illustrated the potential for instrumentalisation and political violence around a natural disaster event.

Natural disasters not only cause physical devastation and inflict negative personal impacts on those effected. They have multi-layered political and societal effects that can be exploited by malign and extremist actors and movements. As the pandemic experience highlighted, extremist actors are adept at interpreting natural disasters and reframing emergencies to:

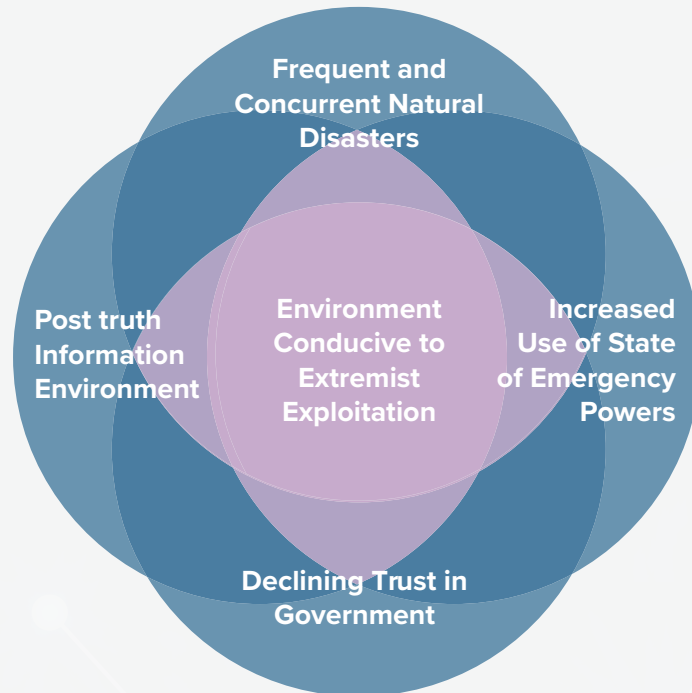
contest and undermine government legitimacy

identify and target out-groups

encourage mobilisation

incite and engage in violence against out groups and the state⁴

⁴ RAN small scale expert meeting (2020). "Harmful Conspiracy Myths and Effective P/CVE Countermeasures," Conclusion Paper, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-11/ran_paper_conspiracy-myths-expert-meeting_en.pdf



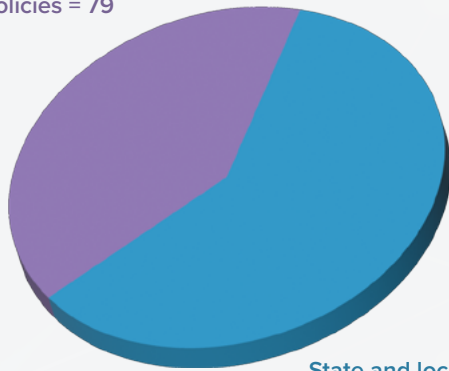
There is scant research examining how natural disasters and emergencies intersect with violent extremism, political violence and civil unrest in the Australian context. The Crisis Points Research Project seeks to address this gap and aims to better understand and address extremist and malign actor exploitation of natural disasters and emergencies within high-GDP, consolidated democracies like Australia. The project also seeks to assess the policy frameworks of government. It explores what the impact of this instrumentalisation will be on radicalisation to violent extremism, on trust in and legitimacy of government (noting that public dependence and need for government during times of natural disasters and emergencies is high), and on overall social cohesion and community resilience. It examines how they could be adjusted to tackle the increasingly intersecting issues of extremism and political violence and disaster and emergency management and communications, and identifies integration gaps in emergency management and countering violent extremism (CT/CVE) and disaster and emergency management/ disaster response (DEM/DR) policies that need to be addressed.

In this report, we present the finding of a policy stocktake that analysed whether the policies, plans, and strategies for Australia’s disaster and emergency management (DEM), disaster response (DR) and recovery, counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts take into account the integrated issues of disaster response, disinformation and potential for extremist and malign actor exploitation of natural disasters.

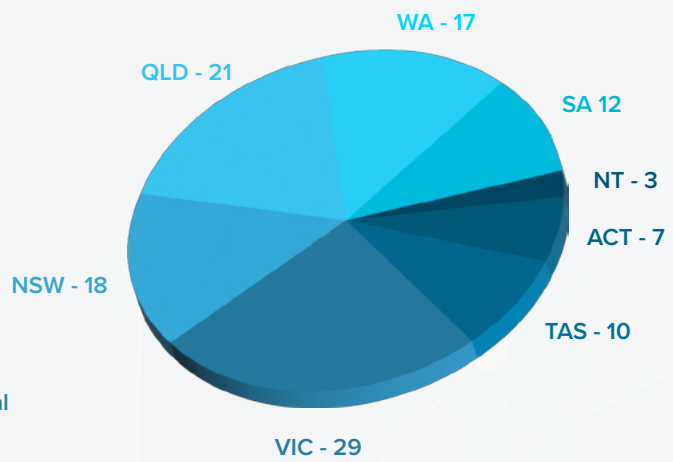
Using a policy/document analysis methodology, this report reviewed the past twenty four years of Australian government policies (2000–2024) to inquire if the policies have incorporated and acknowledged these dynamics around natural disasters and extremism, political violence, and civil unrest. For this policy stocktake, (n=196) documents were analysed.

Policies Analysed

National/Commonwealth policies = 79

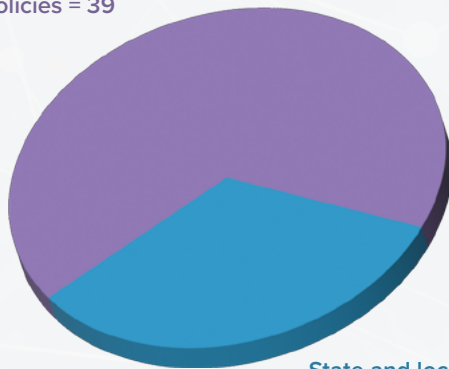


State and local policies = 117

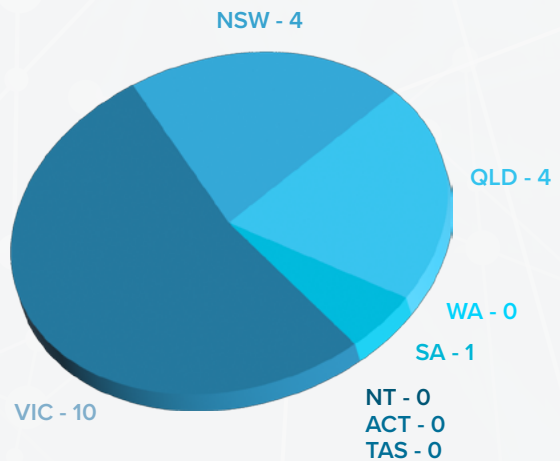


Counterterrorism Countering Violent Extremism (CT/CVE) Policies

National/Commonwealth policies = 39

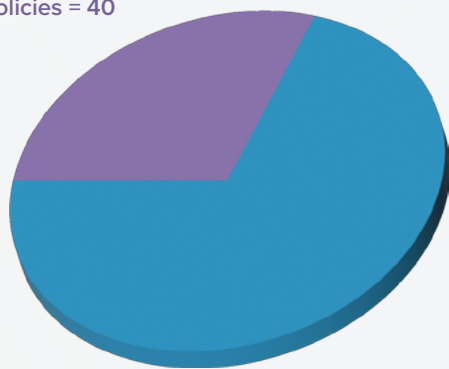


State and local policies = 19

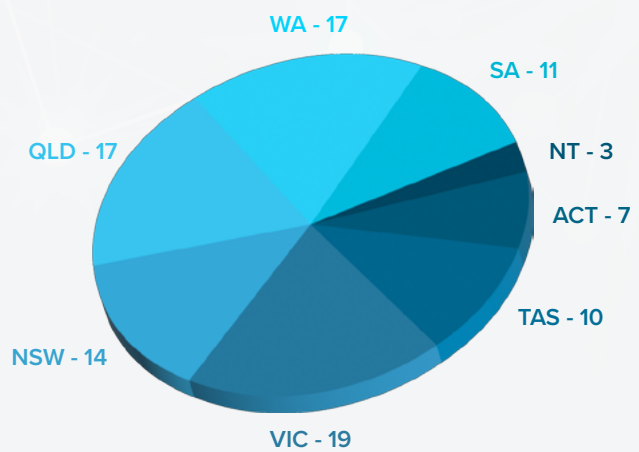


Disaster and Emergency Management (DEM)/ Resilience & Recovery Policies

National/Commonwealth policies = 40



State and local policies = 98



KEY TAKEAWAYS

The data extracted from these policies included information on:

- The ideological assumptions, key concepts and underpinning program logic of the policy,
- Whether the policy sets out how natural disasters/emergencies can be exploited or instrumentalised by extremist and malign actors.
- Whether the policy acknowledges how natural disasters and emergencies can impact individual and social/ community vulnerabilities to violent extremism.
- Whether the policy acknowledges the potential for the spread of disinformation around a natural disaster/emergency event and whether it has developed or referenced a communications strategy or approach to deal with disinformation around a natural disaster/ emergency event

The Key Takeaways:

- Natural disasters and emergencies are opportunities for extremist exploitation and instrumentalisation. **There is evidence of natural disaster related or motivated violent extremist incidents and plots in Australia, but it is limited. However, extremist and anti-government actors can, and have, induced other societal and political harms and violence.** Extremist and anti-government actors:
 - Plot and conduct violent extremist attacks motivated by or taking advantage of disaster and emergency conditions (limited)

- Engage in violent protest and civil unrest
- Exploit grievances and vulnerabilities created by disaster and emergency conditions to recruit and encourage mobilisation to their cause
- Identify out-groups to blame and incite and engage in vilification and violence against identified out-groups, government institutions, elected officials, and response agency efforts and personnel
- Create and spread disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories related to a natural disaster event.

All of which contribute to polarisation and community conflict, challenge community relations and social cohesion, undermine democratic, multicultural societies and seek to delegitimise government.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic is the most illustrative example of how extremists can instrumentalise and exploit natural disasters in democratic, high GDP contexts like Australia.** The pandemic was not only an opportunity for existing extremist movements to recruit and mobilise, but it **also motivated political violence and provided the impetus for the creation of new extremist movements and coalitions.** The COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated how the proliferation of conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns by right wing, sovereign citizen and conspiracy-based anti-government extremists resulted in violent plots, attacks, protests, and other forms of political violence and civil unrest.

- **While the pandemic experience clearly highlighted how extremist actors can instrumentalise and exploit natural disasters, it was not the first, or only, instance of extremists and anti-government actors exploiting natural disaster conditions.** They have also done so during bushfires, floods, hurricanes, etc.
- The frequency and concurrence of natural disasters and emergencies have also prompted democratic governments to utilise state of emergency declarations more often and in quicker succession. States of emergency are increasingly being framed by anti-government actors, particularly sovereign citizen, right wing and conspiracy-based movements, not as necessary and temporary extensions of government authority, but **as tools of social control and evidence of authoritarian tendencies. They do this in an effort to delegitimise democratic governments and elected officials.**
- **Natural disasters cause diverse adverse physical, economic, social, and psychological effects that create both societal and individual vulnerabilities.** In addition to creating vulnerabilities, **natural disaster and crises events can also create grievances,** particularly if disaster response and recovery efforts are lacking. These vulnerabilities and grievances can be exploited by extremist actors for recruitment and mobilisation, and contribute to the uptake in disinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Due to the fractured and polarised information environment, it has **become increasingly difficult to impart accurate messaging and directives from government and other authoritative sources** to mount effective disaster response and recovery efforts, maintain trust among citizens, and ensure that community resilience and social cohesion is maintained during and after a disaster events.
- The ideological assumptions and program underpinnings and logic of Australian CT/CVE and DEM/DR policies have evolved over the course of the twenty-four year period since 9/11. This suggests that Australian policy making is adaptive and responsive. Policies are not static but are responsive to the changing threat landscape and strive to become increasingly evidence based.
- Similar language and concepts around the protective nature of community resilience and the importance of social cohesion are used in many of the policies across the security and emergency management spectrum. **Policies and programs from the different policy areas borrow concepts from each other.** The report found that CT/CVE policies have borrowed concepts, language and frameworks from DEM/DR, such as resilience and shared responsibility. **This provides openings and opportunities to make them more in sync and coordinated.**
- However, there is a need to better integrate CT/CVE and DEM/DR efforts. While both policy fields have increasingly used similar language and emphasised the social nature of the impact of terrorism, violent extremism and disasters, the two fields largely operate in parallel. **There has yet to be a comprehensive synthesis of the two fields to support an integrated policy framework and comprehensive conceptual and theoretical understanding of how the risks, vulnerabilities, and responses cross over.**

- More recent emphasis on shared responsibility and community consultation similarly suggests that the program logic of the CT/CVE and DEM/DR policies can incorporate whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches to address cross cutting challenges like extremist exploitation of natural disasters.
- Australian CT/CVE and DEM/DR policies do not explicitly state or address extremist exploitation of natural disasters and emergencies or how disaster conditions create vulnerabilities to violent extremist messaging and appeals. **However, key concepts currently underpinning Australia's policies** – such as social cohesion, resilience in all its variations, acknowledgement of the psychosocial vulnerabilities that can lead to radicalisation to violence and that can emerge from disaster conditions – **are solid foundations on which to base programs and policies that can address the intersection of violent extremism and natural disasters.**
- CT/CVE policy frameworks acknowledge that grievances, deprivation (perceived or actual) or trigger events can cause people to be more open to extremist narratives and appeals. DEM/DR policies acknowledge that the impacts of natural disasters are not just physical but that they can cause significant psychological trauma and distress and have a variety of impacts on communities. Thus, **while these policies do not make an explicit link between natural disasters and violent extremism, the broader understanding of the role of grievances and vulnerabilities, as well as how social cohesion and community capacity can be diminished by natural disasters, can be built upon to understand and address this specific challenge of extremist exploitation of natural disasters.**
- **Person- centred approaches in DEM/ DR acknowledge and can help address the impacts of trauma caused by natural disasters and mental health recovery are relevant to addressing this challenge. Social recovery frameworks** that focus on health, wellbeing, security, and community cohesion following a disaster **are well suited to incorporate and address considerations around individual and community vulnerability to violent extremist exploitation** and instrumentalisation following a natural disaster.
- There is an **underlying assumption within the policies that government communications and directives are authoritative. However, in the current information environment, it has become increasingly difficult to ensure the take-up of accurate messaging and communication from government or authoritative sources.** This has made it more difficult to mount effective government disaster response and recovery efforts and to maintain trust and ensure cooperation from the general population. The increased occurrence and scale of natural disasters and complex emergencies within a contested information environment will mean that **security and emergency management and disaster response and recovery policy and planning need to better address disinformation and distrust of government and response agencies communication and directives.**
- Many policies emphasise the need for clear and consistent government messaging and warnings. However, in this examination, only a limited number of policies (n=3) specifically addressed the potential for disinformation during and after an emergency. **There is scant acknowledgement of the risks and harms of disinformation or the need to counter**

- disinformation.** While the majority of Australian policies may not account for the potential for disinformation, there is a strong emphasis on consistent, credible communications, the need to put forward clear and timely warnings, to be a source of trusted information and to establish effective media engagement and public communications.
- **One of the major elements linking CT/CVE and DEM/DR is disinformation. But there is a lack of policy maturity in integrating and addressing disinformation across the policy areas. There is a need to better integrate efforts that counter disinformation and to build individual and societal resilience to disinformation across CT/CVE and DEM/DR.** There is a critical gap and **clear need to explicitly acknowledge and address the harms of disinformation in government CT/CVE and DEM/DR policies.** Disinformation not only makes disaster response and recovery more difficult, it erodes trust and contributes to the delegitimation of government authority that can lead to violent extremism, political violence and produce many other risks and harms to society.
 - Disaster risk reduction (DRR) perspectives embedded in the Sendai Framework outline what societies can do to reduce risks before a disaster strikes, what should be done at the onset of a disaster to minimise adverse impacts, and the interventions following a disaster to restore the environmental and social infrastructure of affected communities. Given that there is a risk of exploitation and instrumentalisation of a disaster, **countering and addressing that risk in DRR frameworks within high GDP countries like Australia should be acknowledged and considered.**
 - **Utilising systemic risk frameworks can be useful in understanding and addressing extremist exploitation and instrumentalisation of natural disasters and emergencies,** as this type of risk is not usually obvious when using hazard by hazard risk assessments. A systemic risk framework can help governments and communities enact wholistic risk reduction efforts, manage the risks associated with extremist exploitation of natural disasters, and ultimately help provide tools and knowledge respond.
 - **Many state jurisdictions have an “all hazards, all agencies” and “shared responsibilities” approach** to emergency management that calls for shoring up whole-of-community resilience to minimise vulnerabilities to any of the risks associated with those hazards. **All-hazards approaches, and definitions of disaster and emergency that encompass environmental and manmade events, is recognition of the similar impacts terrorism and natural disasters can have.** This is relevant to a discussion of extremist exploitation of natural disasters in that the two threats are becoming more integrated. Applying an all-hazards approach or comprehensive lens to these challenges means that the various response agencies can have better situational awareness and coordination. **However, what is missing is an acknowledgement that the different hazards and emergencies can be interlinked; that one can cause the other, as is the case with extremist exploitation of natural disasters and emergencies.**
 - Over the past twenty four years Australia’s policies across CT/CVE and DEM/DR have become more sophisticated. The increased focus on societal impacts and community roles across both CT/CVE and DEM/DR policy fields

means that it would be quite possible for them to take into account the integrated issues of DEM/DR and CVE, and other risks and harms that challenge government legitimacy and community safety. **Existing policy frameworks can be adapted and adjusted to meet this emerging challenge of extremist and malign actor exploitation of natural disasters and emergencies.**

The intention of the Crisis Points Research Project is to contribute to the research evidence base, identify gaps, and provide useful points of consideration that can be incorporated into current and future policy making.



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