

Exploring the impact that letter drops have on flood risk reduction behaviours

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Letter drops have commonly been used by governments and risk agencies as a method of community engagement as they do not require individuals to seek out information and instead provide a 'blanket coverage'. The assumed effectiveness of letters is that individuals and households will take, for example, flood risk reduction actions after receiving expert information and advice. However, despite the use of letter drops within flood risk management, there has been little investigation into their effectiveness. The aim of my thesis was to explore the impact that letter drops have on flood risk reduction behaviours. This thesis investigated the use of letter drops as part of the Community Engagement for Disaster Risk Reduction (CEDRR) project. Letter drops were used as part of the participant elicitation method within the CEDRR project's case study in Darebin, Victoria. Participants who signed up after receiving a letter that was dropped at their door are the focus of this thesis. This thesis used a mixed methods approach involving quantitative data that was collected through the CEDRR project and qualitative data that was collected from 12 semi-structured interviews.

CEDRR researchers dropped a total of 3,114 letters at homes in the 1% AEP as part of their participant elicitation method in Darebin. Letters informed recipients about the project, promised a \$25 dollar donation to a local community organisation if they participated, and invited them to sign up via a QR code. The effectiveness of letter drops as a method of participant elicitation was low. The total number of people who signed up from the 3,114 letters dropped was just 14, representing a response rate of 0.45%. This constitutes an extremely low return given the considerable investment made by the CEDRR project to produce and hand deliver these letters. These results demonstrate that the letter drop approach was not an effective method of elicitation. Furthermore, most letter drop participants could not recall how they had signed up to participate in the CEDRR project. When asked how they had signed up to the CEDRR project, most letter drop participants stated that they could not remember:

"I'm honestly wondering how it did come across to me. Was it probably something that the council? Was it a council email? I don't know, I can't remember" (Participant #6).

These results demonstrate that letter drops were not an effective participant elicitation method for the CEDRR project in Darebin. This challenges the assumed effectiveness behind letter drop use within flood risk management. These results also question the assumed benefits of using letter drops as a method of community engagement. The low letter drop response rate indicates that whatever the assumed benefits of this method are, the outcomes do not appear to justify this approach. The revelation that most letter drop participants could not recall how they had signed up to the CEDRR project also supports the implication from this thesis around the ineffectiveness of letter drops. The ineffectiveness of letter drops suggests that flood risk management practices should implement alternative engagement

methods rather than letter drops. Further, 12 out of the 14 CEDRR letter drop participants indicated that a personal connection to research was the primary motivation for their participation. This connection was important as many participants felt empathy towards CEDRR researchers, owing to their own experience conducting research and struggling to find participants:

“When you've had to pick up recruits yourself, you sort of feel a bit [empathetic] to people having to do their own thing” (Participant #7).

This connection to research was also important for the motivation among letter drop participants as it correlated with trust in the CEDRR project. Without this trust, some participants indicated they probably would not have taken part in the project:

“I would probably never participate in something that was just like a random survey where I wasn't familiar with the organization that was conducting it” (Participant #8)

The importance of trust has been well acknowledged and studied within the flood risk management literature. However, as far as I am aware, empathy has not previously been accounted for within flood risk management practices or literature. This result is particularly unique because it suggests the only people who respond to letter drops as a form of participant elicitation are researchers. CEDRR participants were also promised a charitable donation as part of their participation, but this only had a secondary impact upon the motivation of letter drop participants. Most participants agreed that the inclusion of the donation was a good idea, but it simply reinforced their existing decision to sign up:

“It was the icing on the cake. If there was nothing, I still would have done it. But it was just, it was a nice gesture and opportunity to support a charity” (Participant #11).

This indicates the use of a promised donation as an incentive does not have a major impact upon letter drop participation. Within the Darebin case study, there were 14 letter drop participants and 141 face-to-face sign-up participants. The impacts of participation were determined by answers given to specific interview questions within the follow up CEDRR engagement. A comparison of impacts between letter drops participants vs face-to-face sign-up participants revealed little differences between the two samples. For example, when asked if they had taken any risk mitigation actions following the engagement, 42% of letter drop participants said yes, while 43% of face-to-face participants said yes. The results indicated that the engagement method which CEDRR participants used to sign up to the project did not have any notable affect upon the impacts of participation. The challenges surrounding letter drop within flood risk management then appear less to do with what impact the participation will have, and rather to do with the ineffectiveness of letter drops in generating participation.