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Maui

Report: Growing Number Of Maui County Residents Are ‘Barely Surviving’

The Aug. 8 fires had a significant financial impact across Maui, and a majority of people surveyed say they are more worried than hopeful about their future in Hawaii.

By Jessica Terrell / About 8 hours ago

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Nearly half of Maui residents say their financial situation has worsened since the Lahaina fire and 1 in 5 are “seriously considering” leaving the state, according to a new report that paints a troubling picture of the challenges facing fire survivors — and the county as a whole.

More than two-thirds of fire survivors have struggled to afford groceries in the last year, and half have cut back on medical care for financial reasons.

“We don’t use the word ‘poverty’ very often to talk about the situations in Maui County and we should,” said Lisa Grove, lead researcher of the Maui Together Wildfire Assessment.



More than two-thirds of Maui residents surveyed by researchers said they had been impacted by the fires, with many reporting an increase in financial struggles. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2023)

More than 2,000 county residents and 1,000 fire survivors participated in the assessment, which is being published by the [Hawaii State Rural Health Association](#) and drew on both written surveys and in-person and online focus groups.

The vast majority of respondents — whether they lived in West Maui or Lanai or Molokai — said they were more worried than hopeful about their future in Hawaii.

Perhaps most troubling, it's the people with the deepest roots in Hawaii who expressed the most uncertainty about their future here, Grove said.

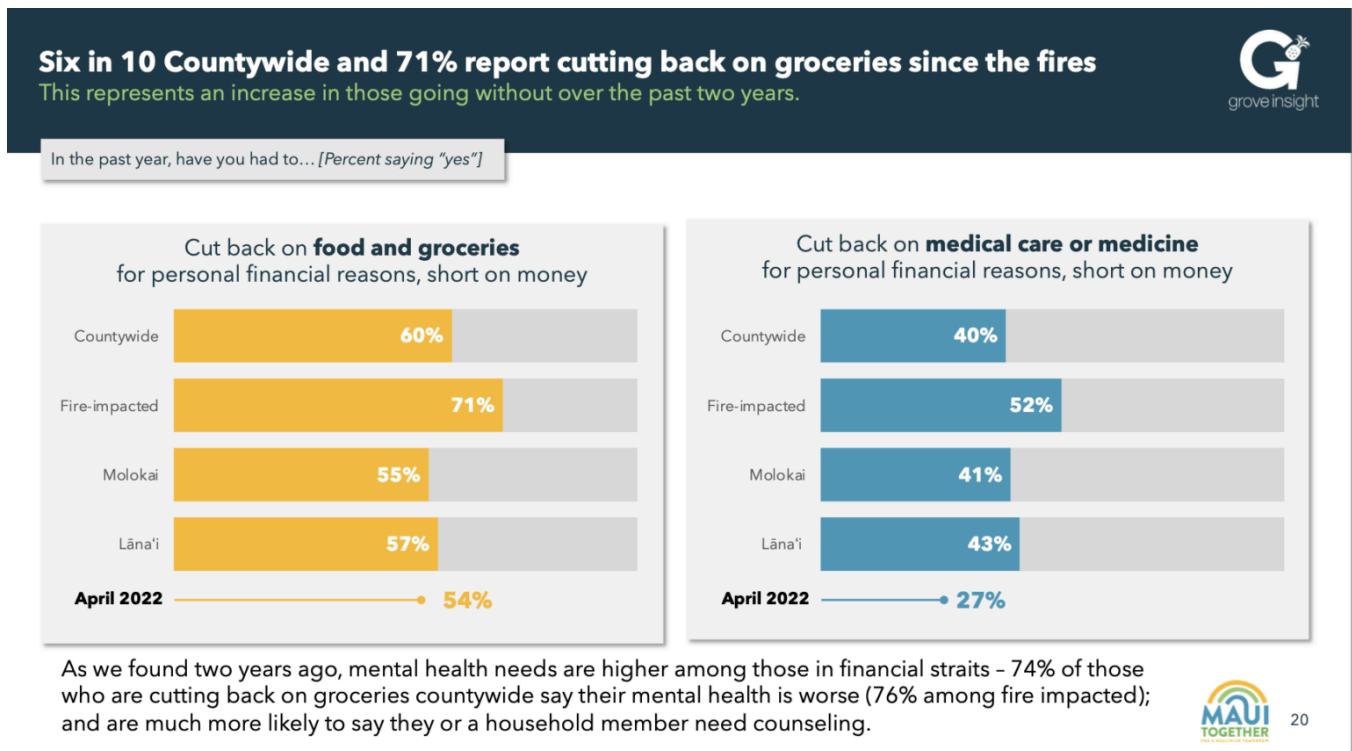
“It’s our Native Hawaiian community. It’s our kupuna. It’s the long-time residents,” Grove said during a presentation Thursday on the survey. “And that is tragic.”

Fire Impacts Wide, But Unequal

The percentage of residents across the county who said they had been directly and indirectly impacted by the fires — 72% — was startling, said Grove, a Lanai resident who has been conducting polls and surveys in Hawaii since 1990.

“Those who have been directly impacted by the fires have experienced greater financial, mental and physical hardship than the rest of the county, though circumstances on all three islands have worsened over the past two years,” the assessment points out.

The mood of people surveyed across the county was grim. “Stress,” “uncertain” and “stressful” were among the most common words respondents countywide selected to describe their life. For fire survivors, “concerned,” “struggling” and “frustrated” were some of the most-used descriptors.



Fire survivors reported higher rates of being unemployed or under-employed than the rest of the county. They also tend to be younger, more likely to have children living with them and were less likely to have a college degree.

Just over half of fire survivors surveyed were living in West Maui, and those who had been able to stay on that side of the island appeared to be faring better than those housed in other places.

Housing instability was, unsurprisingly, a top issue for people displaced by the fire. Roughly 50% of fire survivors said they had moved at least three times since last August, and 11% had moved six or more times.

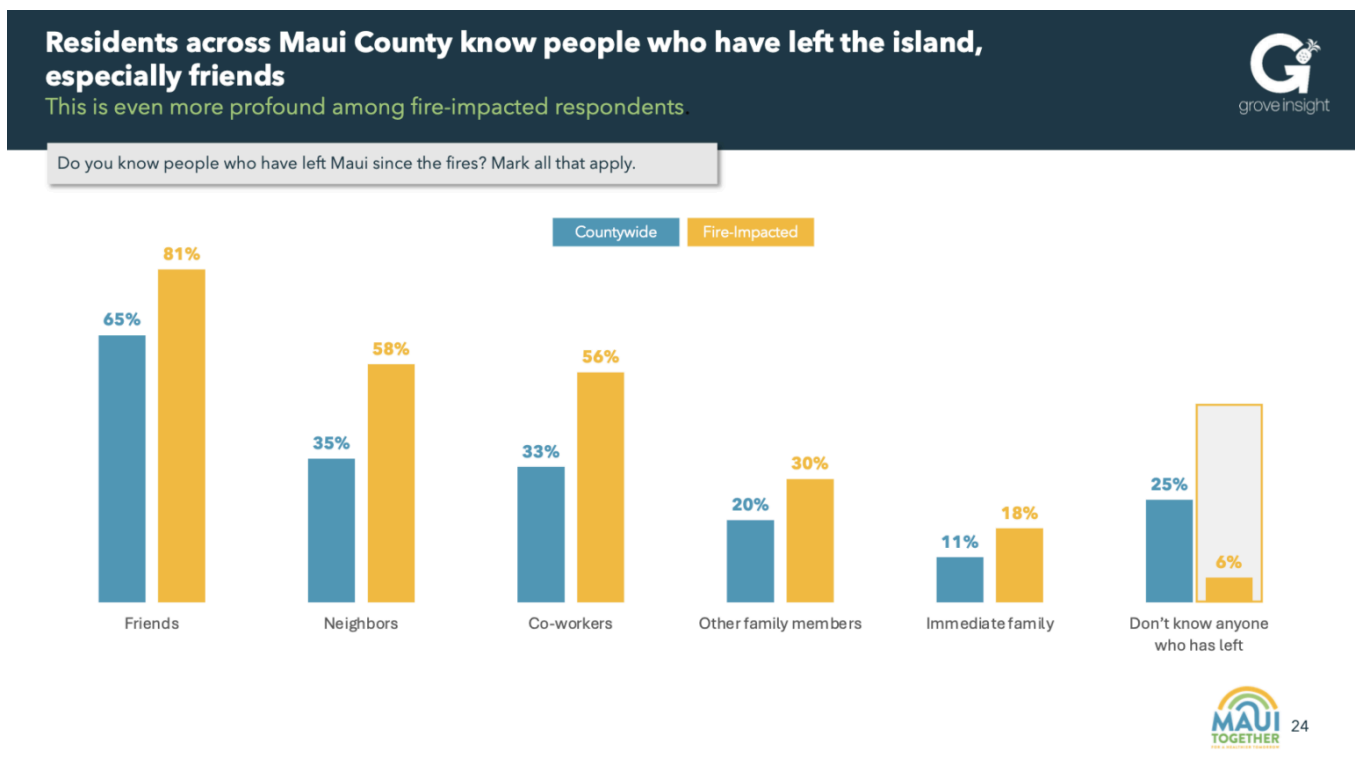
Mental health is also a significant issue, Grove said, and is something that needs to be prioritized in recovery efforts.

An Exodus Coming?

Though there is no definitive data on how many people have left Maui since the fire, the exodus of residents is a significant concern for many in the county.

A majority of people — 81% of fire survivors and 65% of county residents — have had friends move away from Maui since the fire, while 30% of fire survivors had family members leave.

Nearly half — 45% — of fire survivors said they were “very seriously” or “somewhat seriously” thinking about leaving themselves.



Nearly 1 in 3 fire survivors has had family move away from the island since the Aug. 8 fires. (Screenshot/Maui Together Assessment)

While people of all socioeconomic backgrounds said they were contemplating leaving the state, fire survivors who moved in the last year are more likely to be white, older and in a higher income bracket. People who had only been in the state a short time were also more likely to have departed after the fire.

Grove said that in past statewide surveys she's conducted, there are generally three things people say keep them in Hawaii: ohana, a sense of aloha and the multi-ethnic and diverse nature of the state.

There's going to be a tipping point, Grove believes, where those wonderful things are outweighed by the struggles of trying to live here.

"I feel like we can only go so far with those intangibles when you're talking about people saying that they're barely surviving," she said.

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