

Post wildfire report: Maui County residents worried, stressed about making ends meet

July 26, 2024



Lahaina wildfire survivors gather earlier this year for a recovery update at the Lahaina Civic Center. A study released Thursday reports residents are anxious, especially about housing and the high cost of living. Four in 10 are considering leaving the islands. PC: Brian Perry

Maui County residents are worried, stressed by the islands' high cost of living and four in 10 are considering giving up and moving away, according to interviews of 2,646 residents, including 1,105 directly impacted by the August 2023 wildfires.

“Worry dominates over hope right now across the county, largely driven by economic insecurity,” says a “key findings” section of a [study](#) released Thursday. “The high cost of living, especially housing, and the inability to accrue savings are the chief stressors, and it is worse than right after the pandemic.”

Led by the [Hawai'i State Rural Health Association](#) and conducted by Grove Insight, the survey of residents was done from May 20 to June 6 through online interviews. Survey respondents were contacted through text messages, online panels and email addresses. Postcards were sent to random households countywide, especially on Moloka'i and Lāna'i.

Survey participants were asked, all things considered, whether Maui County is “headed in the right direction or is on the wrong track?” And, 51% responded “wrong track,” 36% “not sure” and 13% “right direction.”

Asked whether they feel more hopeful or worried about their future in Hawai'i, 78% of countywide respondents said they were “more worried,” while 76% of fire-impacted respondents said they felt that way. The remaining 22% of countywide respondents said they felt “more hopeful,” while 24% of fire-impacted respondents were similarly positive.

Demographically, those most likely to be worried were people under 55 years old, especially women and younger Americans of Japanese ancestry; women who are Filipino, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; younger, non-college; high-income earners; parents with children at home; unemployed residents; and those considering leaving the islands.

When asked what they personally worry about, the high cost of living was a leading anxiety for 85% of fire-impacted residents and 78% of countywide residents. Another stressor is having long-term, stable and affordable housing for 76% of fire survivors and 64% of

residents countywide. Worry about another devastating fire is a fear for 62% of wildfire survivors and 42% of countywide residents.

The report on findings includes unattributed quotes from respondents. In the section about what residents worry about is the following: “Scared of more fires due to poor water management and ecosystem management causing bare ground which causes droughts that lead to deadly fires. I’m also disabled and have a newborn and live with 2 elderly people over 70. So, we’d all probably die in a fire.”

Most people report trouble saving money: 62% of fire-impacted respondents and 55% of respondents countywide. Having long-term stable and affordable housing is “not too” or “not very” accessible for 63% of fire survivors and 52% of residents countywide.

Respondents’ financial situation is worse than before than August fires for 49% of respondents overall, but 69% of fire survivors says it’s worse, compared with 31% of residents countywide. For mental and physical health, most fire-impacted residents says it’s worse (64%, mental health; 52% physical health).

To make ends meet in the last year, most respondents reported cutting back on food and groceries: 60% countywide; 71% fire-impacted residents; 55% of Moloka‘i residents and 57% of Lāna‘i residents.

Those cutting back in the past year on medical care or medicine for financial reasons, or being short on money, were: 40% of countywide residents; 52% of fire-impacted residents; 41% of Moloka‘i residents and 43% of Lāna‘i residents.

Those reporting struggles with finances, cutting back on food, worsening mental health, households in need of counseling are worsening physical health are higher, as a percentage, for Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders; Med-QUEST patients; those with a high school diploma or less; single heads of households; those earning less than \$40,000 per year; those between 35 and 44 years old; and those considering leaving the islands.

Comments about economic stress and cost of living struggles included:

“Finances are a tremendous struggle. My husband is currently fighting cancer and kidney failure. We have accumulated approximately \$60,000 in credit card debt along with other

loans and expenses. The cost of food on Maui is higher than I ever remember it to be, and I've lived here about 53 years. Gas prices are extremely expensive. Being retired on a fixed income; it's difficult to survive."

"Challenging with the cost of living so high and wages low. People can't afford to live here with the cost of living so high. They simply don't make enough money for rent and groceries."

"I'm still working at 71 to make ends meet."

"It's very hard to afford living here. I have to work more hours just to barely make cost of living." (From a health care provider.)

"I have two full-time jobs in order to sustain our living and able to pay all the mortgage and utilities expenses."

"Nervous. I am about to have my first kid. I am born and raised on Maui, but it seems like we are at a weird tipping point where politicians will either make Maui a place for locals can live and thrive, or they will sell out to Tourism too much again and everyone will have to struggle to live here."

Wildfire survivors reported feeling a profound loss of community.

"I did feel like this whole process, even with the reopening and stuff, was just gaslighting us to feel like this was not that bad, but it was so bad, and I feel like that's what needs to get across to everybody that this was, like, so bad, and that it's still really hard for everybody, and that it's not something that can be fixed, even. And even once the dust settles, and all of that, it's just gonna take a long time."

Another said: "And the community, you know, is gone. You know, we used to be able to do all the stuff we used to do. Walk, bike, go to the shops, go to the restaurants and everything. And that's just not there, and that's not coming back anytime soon. Then, I'm placed, FEMA placed me in an apartment up in Napili, where it's a lot different from mine. I can't complain, but it's like living in a hotel, you know. There's different people coming in all the time. I feel like I'm on a cruise ship. I don't know anybody on this cruise ship."

Fire survivors who've been living in temporary housing and found the experience "traumatizing," with focus-group participants saying they coped with: mandatory check-ins

every 24-72 hours; constant worry about “getting evicted,” having to move; 24-hour “eviction letters” being slid under doors; living among resort-goers; hard to travel off-island; not having a kitchen; owning a pet; loss of privacy due to “routine maintenance”; no real sense of community; a sense of uncertainty and constant upheaval; treatment by intake representatives like the Red Cross, and a perceived lack of compassion.

Long-time residents, Native Hawaiians and kūpuna are among those most concerned about their future. One respondent said: “Kanaka are leaving because they can’t survive here due to the increased prices. Housing for fire victims are not being built. I’ve been on those projects, and they are all a joke. Charging these families over what they can afford. Other residents are kicking out tenants to house fire victims because FEMA is willing to pay them more money. My kids will never be able to afford a piece of land or house for themselves with the way this is going. There is no longer a certainty of life. Those elected officials are not here for the people now and are doing nothing for the kanaka generations to come. Shame.”

The research was funded by the Hawai‘i Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and sponsored by Maui United Way.

Gregg Kishaba, rural health coordinator with the Health Department’s Family Health Services Division/Office of Primary Care & Rural Health, said the department selected the Hawai‘i State Rural Health Association to be the research lead.

The association has the experience, expertise and community connections to conduct the research, and “this ensured that the assessment was conducted respectfully and in a culturally appropriate manner,” he said. “We knew the HSRHA would honor the community voices and convey honest, truthful and unfiltered feedback.”

“Each time I listen to this presentation, I am moved by the heartbreaking and sobering realities it presents,” Kishaba said. “Our hope is that this report will be used by everyone (policy/decision-makers, health care systems, non-profit organizations, funders and community champions) to work collectively to organize, prioritize and mobilize.”