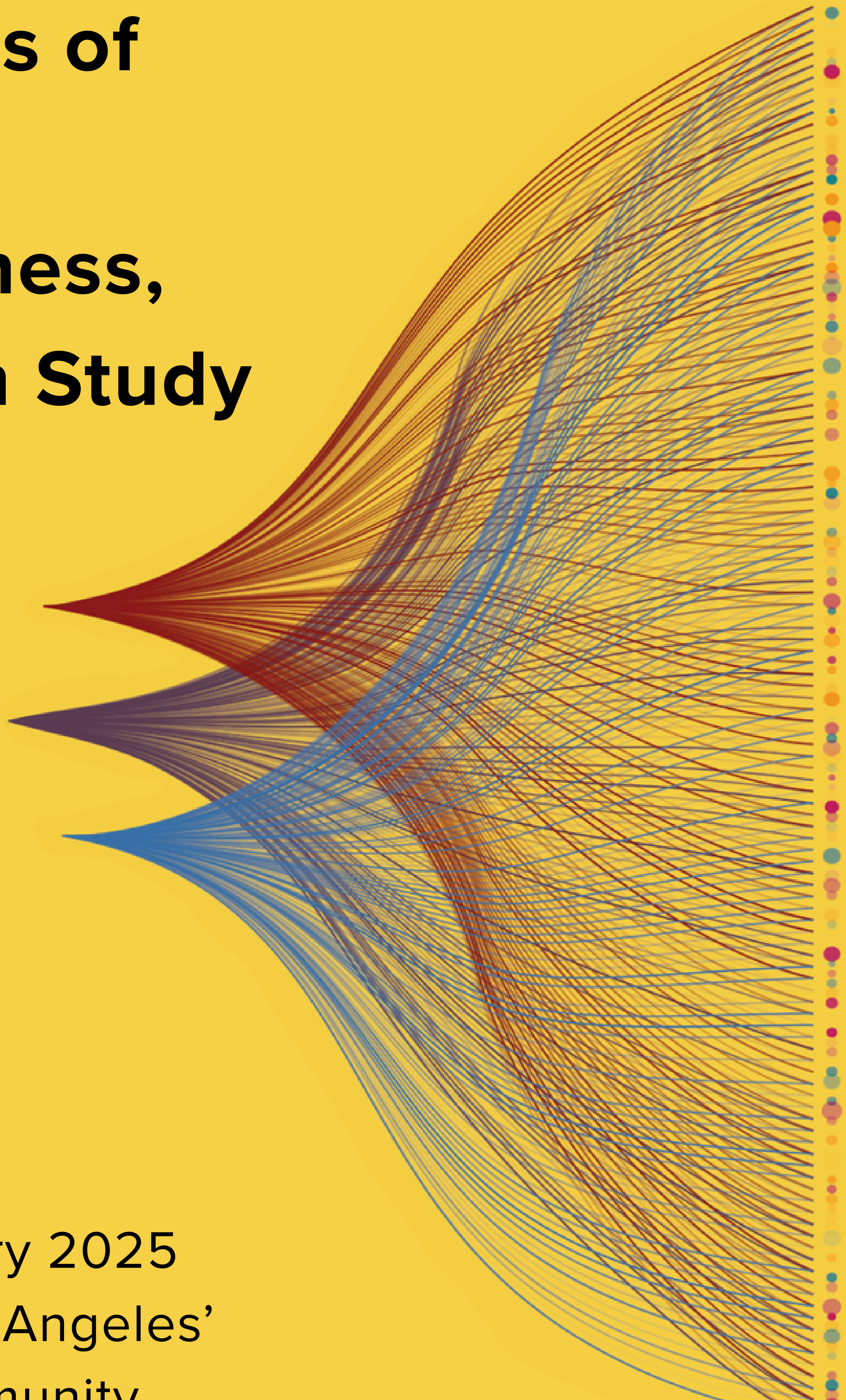
Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness, and Health Study (PATHS)



Impact of January 2025 Wildfires on Los Angeles' Unhoused Community

Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness and Health Study (PATHS):
The Impact of the January 2025 Wildfires on Los Angeles' Unhoused Community

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2025, a series of devastating wind events and wildfires tore through Los Angeles County, leaving widespread destruction and loss of life. Unhoused individuals are often overlooked in disaster response, yet they face heightened health risks due to prolonged exposure to hazardous conditions, severe socioeconomic and medical vulnerabilities, and limited access to care. Despite growing recognition of these risks, little is known about how disasters like wildfires specifically affect the unhoused community.

This report provides a snapshot of the immediate effects of the January 2025 wildfires in Los Angeles County on unhoused Angelenos. Drawing on survey data from the Periodic Assessment of Trajectories of Housing, Homelessness, and Health Study (PATHS), we examine how the firestorm disrupted housing and daily life for a representative sample of unhoused respondents. Measuring the scope of exposure and impacts in the immediate aftermath of disaster is critical for strengthening preparedness, shaping disaster-related policy, and guiding resource allocation to better protect this vulnerable population.

METHODS

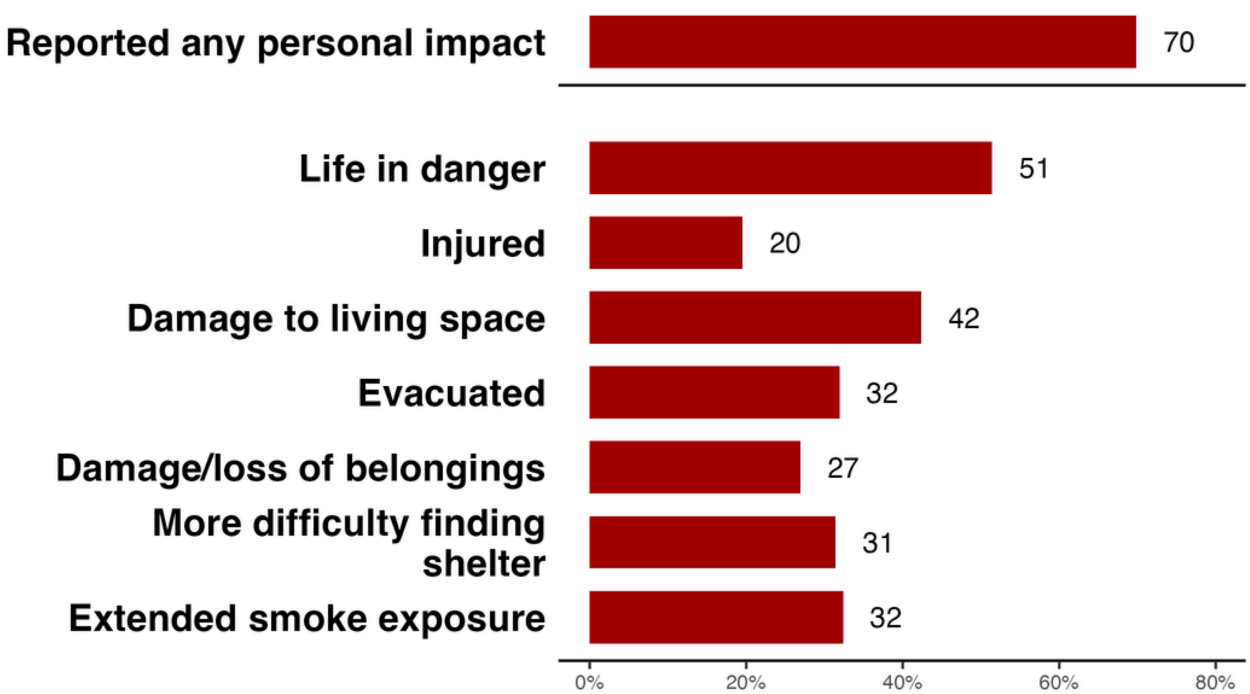
PATHS is a joint effort by USC and UCLA that has tracked a cohort of unhoused Angelenos since December 2021. Through monthly online surveys distributed via text and email, the PATHS platform enabled researchers to respond rapidly to the January 2025 wildfire disaster.

- On January 21, 2025—just one week after the most destructive period of the fires (January 7–14)—a special wildfire impact module was distributed.
- A total of 615 individuals responded; this report focuses on 412 participants who were enrolled in the study in December and completed that month's survey, enabling pre–post comparisons to identify those most at risk.
- On February 6, 2025, a respiratory health module was added to the regular semiannual survey (fielded every February and August). Of the 412 wildfire module respondents, 358 completed this follow-up, enabling a deeper examination of smoke-related health effects from the wildfires.

FINDINGS

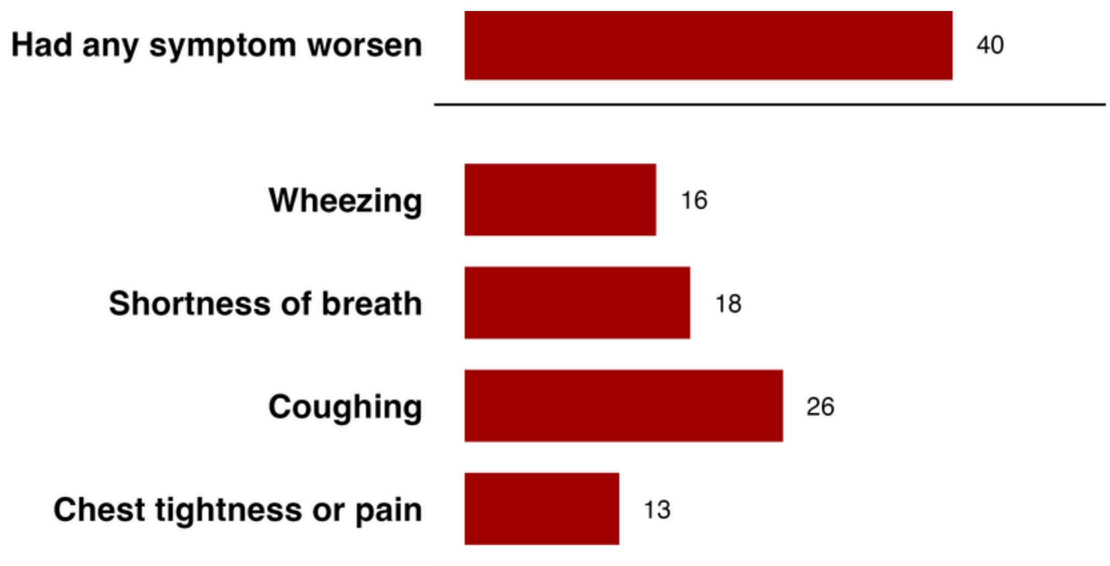
The January 2025 extreme winds and firestorm had a staggering impact on the unhoused community. Seventy percent of respondents reported experiencing at least one form of harm or disruption. Just over half (51%) said they felt their lives were in danger, and nearly 42% reported damage to their living space. Around a third reported being forced to walk through smoke for extended periods (35%), to evacuate (32%), or to navigate greater difficulty finding shelter (31%). One in five (20%) reported being injured.

Figure 1. Self-reported impacts of extreme winds and firestorm among PATHS respondents



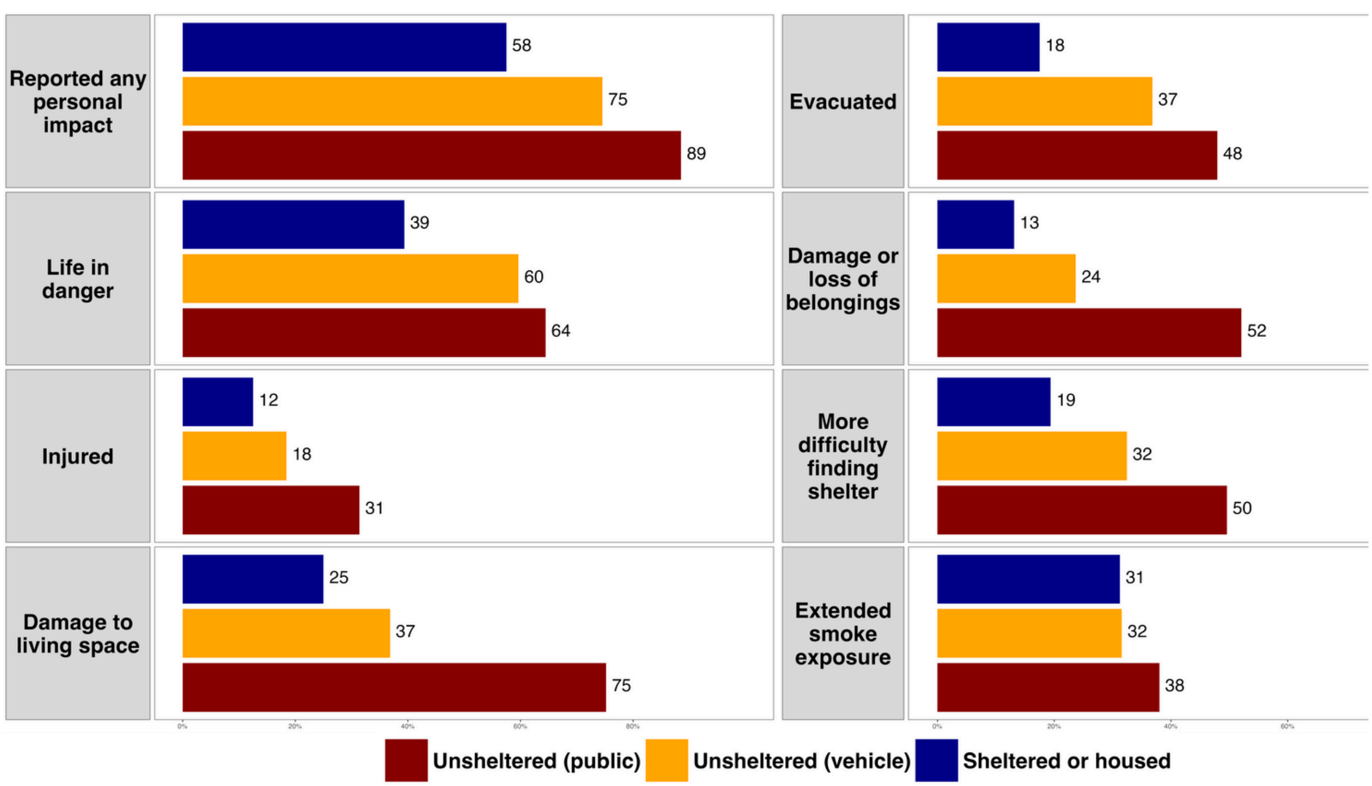
The smoke generated by the January wildfires also took a toll on the respiratory health of unhoused Angelenos. In the February biannual survey, 43% of respondents reported a worsening of respiratory symptoms in the weeks following the fires. Coughing was the most common complaint (26%), followed by shortness of breath, wheezing, and chest tightness or pain.

Figure 2. Self-reported respiratory symptoms among PATHS respondents



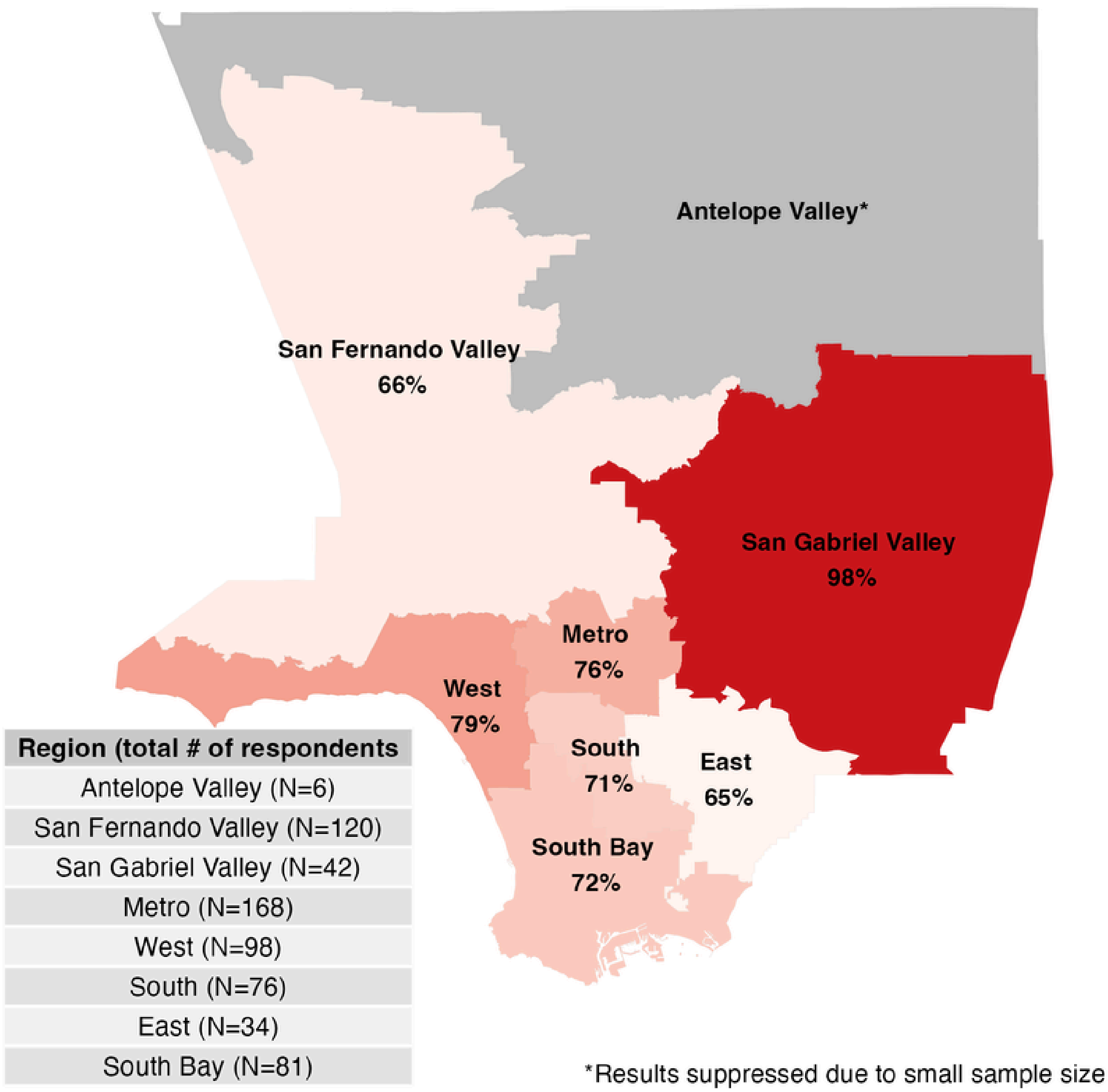
When broken down by housing status, unsheltered individuals—both those living in public space and in vehicles—were consistently the most at risk. Unsheltered individuals, particularly those living outdoors, reported significantly higher levels of danger, injury, displacement, and loss compared to their sheltered counterparts.

Figure 3. Self-reported impacts, by most often housing status in the past month



As expected, the prevalence of self-reported wildfire impacts was highest among respondents in the San Gabriel Valley and West LA—where the largest fires, the Eaton and Palisades Fires, were concentrated—reflecting the heightened risks faced by those living closer to active burn areas and smoke plumes. Differences across regions may also reflect local resource availability, such as shelter beds, emergency alerts, and health services, which can buffer or exacerbate risks. However, results should be interpreted with caution given variation in sample sizes across regions.

Figure 4. Self-reported impacts, by region



*Regions refer to the Service Planning Areas (SPAs) of Los Angeles County

CONCLUSION

These findings highlight the acute vulnerability of unhoused individuals during extreme weather and wildfire disasters. Large proportions of participants were exposed to life-threatening danger, injury, and displacement, while many also experienced direct harm to their living spaces, belongings, and health. Respiratory impacts from wildfire smoke were widespread, further exacerbating existing health hazards for this already at-risk population.

Upcoming analyses will link remote-sensing data on evacuation zones, air pollution, and wind speed to participants' reported locations prior to the fires, providing an additional way to quantify exposure and validate self-reported experiences. We will also examine whether disaster exposure is associated with longitudinal changes in health and wellbeing, including physical health, mental health, healthcare access, and access to basic needs.

Ultimately, these findings underscore the urgent need for disaster planning and response strategies that explicitly address the distinct threats faced by the unhoused population. Strengthening preparedness through evacuation planning, emergency shelter capacity, mobile health services, and reliable access to basic needs can help mitigate preventable harms in future disasters. By integrating self-reported experiences with environmental exposure data, PATHS generates critical evidence to inform more equitable and effective disaster response for unhoused communities.

Report designed by Saachi Pavani