

UNHOUSED COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES WITH LA FIRES: A HEALTH SURVEY

Mutual Aid Research Collective in partnership with:

**AETNA ST
SOLIDARITY**



**STREET CARE
& Mutual Aid**



PASADENA



FOR ALL



**THE
SIDEWALK
PROJECT**

Spring 2026 —————

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ITS A FIRE EVERYDAY WHEN YOU LIVE OUTSIDE

BY TINY , DAUGHTER OF DEE, MAMA OF TIBURCIO

ITS A FIRE EVERYDAY WHEN YOU LIVE OUTSIDE

HOUSELESS PEOPLES ARE LIVING THE EVERYDAY EMERGENCY OF
HOMELESSNESS AND CLIMATE TERRORISM.

BY TINY , DAUGHTER OF DEE, MAMA OF TIBURCIO

*The flames of intense heat dehydrate
The water from floods drown our outside
spaces*

*The Cold seeps into our torn clothes
Way down deep to our tired bones*

*The tornado winds
The sun beats in
The smoke will choke*

*But none so hard as the
Cop Cars*

*The park rangers and the DPW pickUp
Yards*

*Who take it all
No matter who you call*

*Who predate and tow and take
Everything we have in our humble
streetscape*

*Until we can't breathe or see
Or live or even be*

*Its called a sweep
And it happens every day to houseless me*

*This isnt climate change
This is a poltricksters game*

*For us impacted first and worst
So close to mama earth
So for all of u housed relatives too
suffering the terrifying Hurricanes and fire
moves*

*I ask u to recognize the pain
The absolute terror of losing all you have to
your name*

*And for this moment you might be able to
see*

*The violence of living homelessly
Of daily and violent sweeps
On all of these stolen land Turtle Island and
Palestine streets*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Everything that is presented here we owe and we dedicate, firstly, to all of the people who live, love, struggle, heal, and dream outside - in tents, in vehicles, and in public - in Tovangaar, Los Angeles, and especially those who participated directly in the creation of this report. As we know, it's a fire everyday when you live outside, and the myriad ways in which unhoused people keep other alive and sustain collective life far exceed what it is held in this report - thank you, and may this and all future MARC efforts support you in growing and consolidating the knowledge and power we all need to build a better world.

Second, we extend our gratitude and deep dedication to all of the mutual aid collectives and groups whose life-affirming practices of solidarity and care have stayed prefiguring a people's disaster response, since long before the 2025 wildfires and surely long after. We especially thank all the groups whose feedback, trust, and time made carrying out and analyzing this research possible, including but not limited to Aetna Street Solidarity, All Power Free Clinic, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, Grow Together Glendale, JTown Action & Solidarity, Palms Unhoused Mutual Aid, Pasadena for All, the Sidewalk Project, and South Bay Mutual Aid Care Club. We also thank Poor Magazine for the clear vision and example that they articulate for Poverty Scholarship, and all the ways their model and living practice of Homefullness inspires us.

We thank our university collaborators at UCLA - specifically, Randall Kuhn and Ananya Roy with the Institute on Inequality and Democracy - for their principled and patient accompaniment in designing the survey tool, making resources available to us, and analyzing the data. We are grateful for your commitment towards growing the capacity for mutual aid- and people-driven research and towards research justice more broadly.

And lastly, we thank Carmen for all her support, patience, and creative labor that went into designing the report!

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BACKGROUND

On January 7, 2025, the greater Los Angeles area experienced the onset of extreme wildfires, most notably the **Palisades Fire**, which primarily affected the Santa Monica Mountains, and the **Eaton Fire**, which struck Altadena. These fires deeply affected Los Angeles, **resulting in the loss of more than 16,000 structures, mostly homes**. Because of these wildfires, tens of thousands of people became unhoused and many more were forced to evacuate their homes—in other words, many Angelenos were experiencing the forms of displacement and loss of shelter that unhoused people in Los Angeles experience every day.

Meanwhile, unhoused people in Los Angeles were experiencing the compounding of challenges on top of typical cycles of displacement. Not only were city resources strained by having to reckon with a large-scale disaster, city resources like social services and shelters, that unhoused people may have otherwise relied on, were now scarce, with thousands of housed people now needing access to shelter. **Unhoused people, especially those who primarily lived outdoors, also experienced the health impacts of prolonged exposure to wildfire smoke**. Many unhoused people also experienced shocks to their support networks, as other community members made individual decisions about their shelter and evacuation plans, and routine mutual aid networks expanded their scope to assist victims of the wildfires.

Unhoused people are routinely excluded from narratives about natural disasters, all while being one of the populations most exposed to the elements. While many might assume that this might mean that unhoused people were afraid and emotionally affected by the wildfires—and many certainly were—in this report, we note that our unhoused neighbors are so routinely disrupted and displaced through sweeps, a form of state-inflicted displacement, that many were desensitized to the displacement they were experiencing from the fires.



Furthermore, many unhoused residents had already acquired valuable skills and know-how around how to manage intense and chaotic environment exposures, and relied on these strategies to help them weather the fires' effects. Thus, while displacement was new to housed people, it was not new to people living on the streets— and while resources for shelter and aid were provided by the state and other non-profit organizations to fire victims, little to no support was provided to people who were unhoused before the fires. This acute-on-chronic organized abandonment of LA's unhoused communities - and their and mutual aid groups' resistance to it - is a critical piece of the broader story about the LA fires that this report seeks to recount and recover.

As people in Los Angeles awaken to the reality that the state not only fails to respond to the increasing disasters befalling us but actively creates the conditions that worsen and cause them, the need for a people's disaster response is ever clearer.

When the fire comes next time, who is going to save you?

***It's not the city – it's probably someone
used to living in a tent or a car. The
streets are the frontlines, and there is a
lot to learn about how to prepare for
disaster from unhoused people who are
already living through one every day.***

GOALS OF THIS REPORT

Research is about asking and investigating the questions that we need to answer to better understand the society we need to build. A previous community-driven audit on conditions within Inside Safe was motivated by mutual aid groups' recognition that there was no accountability around Inside Safe, so we needed to create our own. This report is no different and directly inspired by that effort and the organizing it facilitated.

We acknowledge the high level of detail present in this report— this is by design. We understand (and hope!) that not every reader of this report is a researcher, organizer, or even accustomed to reading reports on community-based research.

We provide extensive detail out of a commitment toward removing the barriers for others in the mutual aid community interested in replicating these processes. Beyond documenting the findings of this particular experiment in people's research, we believe this report can serve as a manual or field guide for others who wish to conduct similar research and community convenings of their own. We encourage readers to engage with as much or as little attention to detail as they desire— providing as much transparency as possible is an act of care, mutual aid in itself, and an investment in movements that we hope to support and sustain in the future.

In writing this report, we aim to:

- * **Document the experiences of unhoused people in Los Angeles during the January fires and the failures of city and county agencies to meet community needs during this crisis**
- * **Redress the lack of testimony and participation from unhoused people experiencing emergencies and disasters**
- * **Advocate for unhoused people's experiences to be taken into account during disaster planning and organize mutual aid networks to build out disaster preparedness**
- * **Convene unhoused people and mutual aid organizers to jointly discuss and analyze the outcomes of the survey project, and**
- * **Provide a blueprint for how mutual aid networks might approach and replicate research projects of their own**

COMMUNITY SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Shortly after the immediate emergency of the wildfires waned, our team - mutual aid organizers with training in social science and community action methodologies - formed the **Mutual Aid Research Collective (MARC)** to design and field a survey that would help affected unhoused communities and organizers collect and learn from their experiences.

Developing the Survey Instrument

The structure and format of the survey instrument, or the list of questions that each respondent was asked, was modeled off of previous survey instruments administered by Los Angeles-based mutual aid organizations, such as the July 2024 Inside Safe Community Audit.

To craft the questions themselves, our team reviewed pre-existing literature on health impacts of wildfire smoke and consulted environmental health researchers. The instrument was collaboratively written by people who organize with a variety of mutual aid groups across the county, so we brought a variety of first-hand experiences to the preparation of the instrument and also used our experiences to guide the development of question content. We used Google Forms to collaboratively add and edit questions and response categories.

After our team completed the draft of the survey instrument, we sent it to Los Angeles-based mutual aid organizations for feedback. The primary critique we received was around the length of the survey, which we estimated to take a maximum of 30 minutes to complete. While our team did make efforts to streamline the survey, we strongly believed in retaining the majority of the question content. **We primarily addressed these organizations' concerns by:**

- a) offering our own volunteers to field the survey, so that mutual aid organizations would not need to take time out of their weekly outreach to field the survey
- b) ensuring that all respondents were compensated for their time.

Creating a Survey Protocol

The survey protocol, or the instructions for identifying and fielding the survey to potential respondents, was included in the Google Form that was used to track and log responses for all respondents. Interviewers were given a set of eligibility criteria to identify potential survey respondents.

Criteria

- 1 Unhoused, or living in a vehicle, motel, or other temporary shelter**
- 2 Was located in Los Angeles during the period of the fires**
- 3 Self-identified as someone who was directly impacted by the fires**
- 4 Expressed interest in City/County response and disaster planning for unhoused communities**

The Google Form that all volunteer interviewers received was formatted for them to field the survey orally—that is, the form was structured so that they could read aloud from the form like a script, and respondents would orally provide their responses for interviewers to log and document. Informed consent language was included in the beginning of the Google Form for the interviewer to formally introduce the project to the respondent. Interviewers were tasked with logging answers to closed questions, such as multiple choice and select all that apply questions, as well as open-ended answers, which were intended to feel more like a conversation.

Fielding the Survey

To field this survey and ensure that mutual aid organizations were involved in every stage of the process, we developed research partnerships with mutual aid and community organizations. These partnerships were essential for implementation, as the process of survey administration was relational and highly dependent on existing foundations of trust brokered between mutual aid volunteers, researchers, and respondents. Surveys turned into conversations that deepened understanding about the fires as much as they did relationships.

Partner Organizations

- ✳ Aetna Street Solidarity
- ✳ All Power Free Clinic
- ✳ Grow Together Glendale
- ✳ LA Street Care
- ✳ Palms Unhoused Mutual Aid
- ✳ Pasadena For All
- ✳ Sidewalk Project



All Power Books, Friday, January 10th, 2025.



Pasadena For All, Saturday, January 11th, 2025.



LA Street Care, Sunday, January 12th, 2025.

COMMUNITY DATA ANALYSIS

Organizing Raw Data

After about 4 weeks of administering the survey with the various mutual aid groups, our team had successfully collected data from a total of 57 individuals who were unhoused or housing insecure and impacted by the fires.

In order to prepare the collected data for analysis by the larger community, one of the study researchers organized the raw data, without making too many decisions that would alter the definitions, meaning, or how things were inputted. Instead, the initial data organizing process is focused on removing potential errors or duplicate entries. Each data cleaning step was recorded and documented, so that if any decision is in question, it can easily be traced back and adjusted in the raw database.

The process for organizing the raw data included:

- Downloading the surveys onto a Google Sheet
- Create general categories of data
- Demographic, Health, Emergency Response, Qualitative
- Delete/edit any errors or duplicates
- Consolidate similar responses and create dropdown menu

Creating Data Displays

The data displays are meant to provide community members and participants in the survey a way to begin to analyze and understand the results for themselves and their organizations. The initial data displays are all univariate (using one variable or characteristic), with further bivariate (using two variables) and cross-tabulations done in future convenings and data analysis workshops.

The data displays were all produced using Google Sheets, by selecting each survey question response column, and then inserting a bar chart or pie graph, depending on the question.

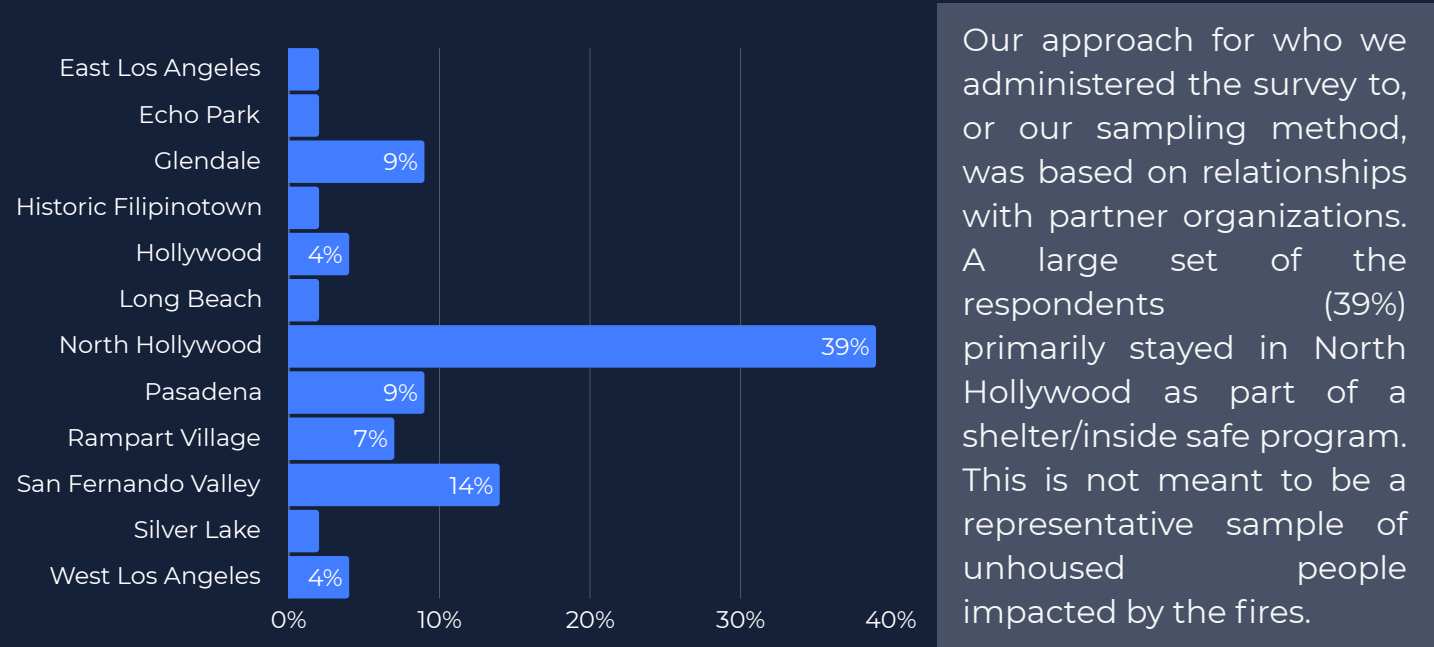
The following data displays are a portion of the larger survey for community members to be able to begin to situate and understand the data results.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

DEMOGRAPHIC

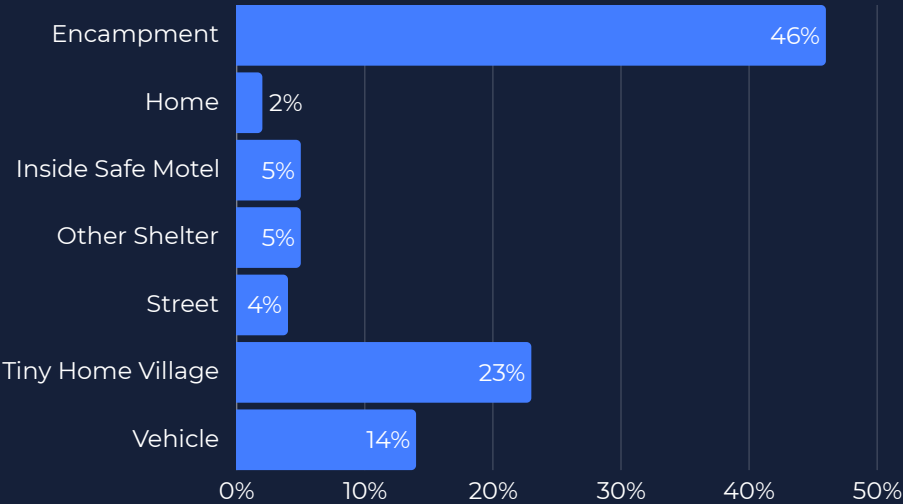
Total Number of interviewees:
n= 57

WE ASKED: IN WHICH NEIGHBORHOOD/AREA DO YOU PRIMARILY STAY?



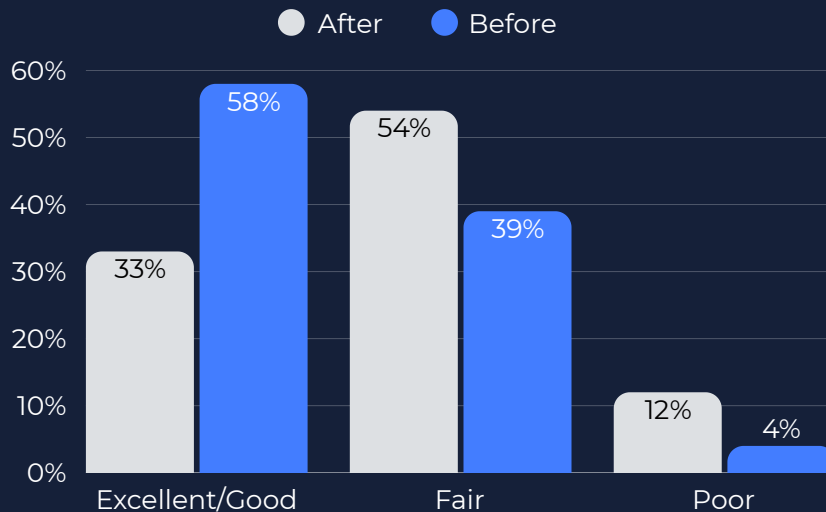
WE ASKED: WHAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CURRENT RESIDENCE?

Most respondents reported that they were currently living in an encampment (46%), followed by those who were in a Tiny Home Village (23%), and then those living in a vehicle (14%). The rest of the respondents were either couch surfing, in an inside safe motel, on the street, a shelter, or a home.



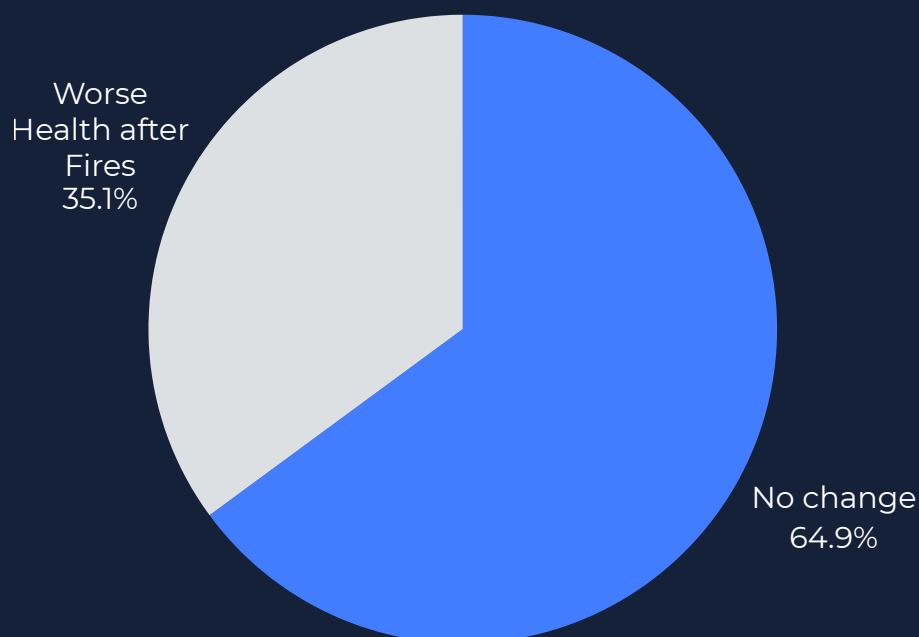
HEALTH

WE ASKED: IN GENERAL, BEFORE THE FIRES, HOW WOULD YOU HAVE RATED YOUR HEALTH?



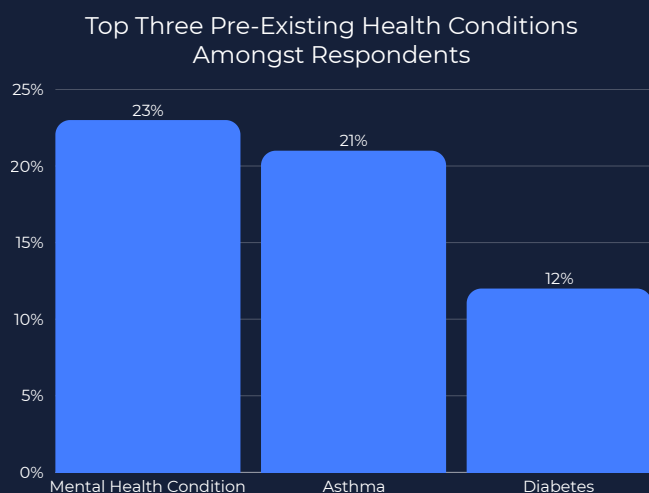
Self-reported health outcomes were worse after the fires, with a clear decrease in the number of people who reported having Excellent or Good health before (58%) and after the fire (33%), and an increase in respondents reporting Fair health (from 39% to 54%) or Poor health (from 3.5% to 12%).

WE ASKED: IN GENERAL, NOW AFTER THE FIRES, HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR HEALTH?



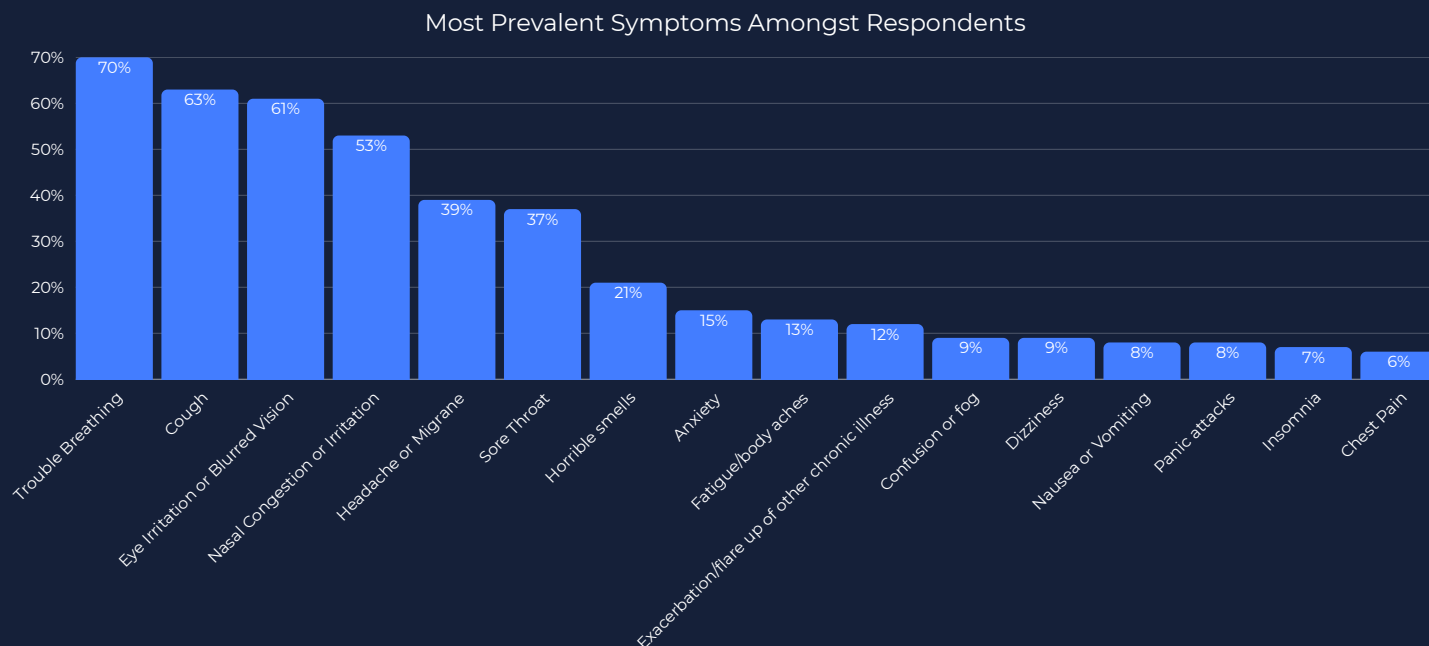
Over one-third of respondents (35.1%) rated their health worse after the fires.

WE ASKED: BEFORE THE FIRES, DID YOU HAVE ANY HEALTH CONDITIONS THAT YOU WERE AWARE OF?



Respondents were asked about 14 different pre-existing health conditions based on a combination of literature-reported common conditions among unhoused communities and MARC members' practical experiences and knowledge supporting unhoused community members' health in Los Angeles. The top 3 conditions that respondents reported were Mental Health Condition (23%), Asthma (21%), and Diabetes (12%).

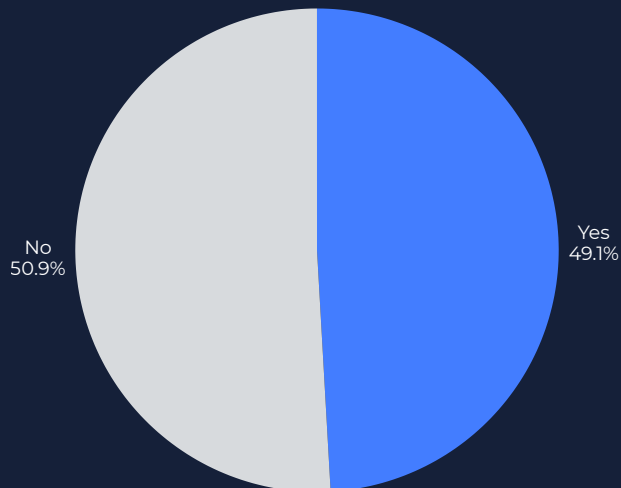
WE ASKED: WHAT SYMPTOMS OR HEALTH CONDITIONS DID YOU EXPERIENCE DURING THE FIRES?



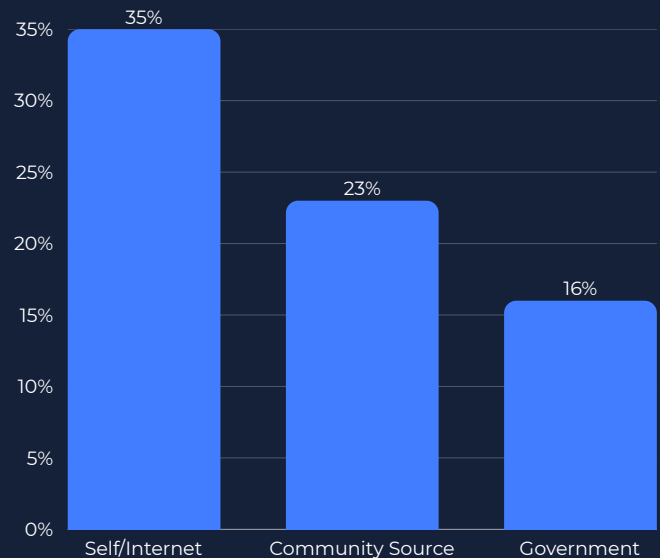
Nearly all respondents (93%) reported experiencing at least one negative health symptom as a result of the fires. The most prevalent symptoms among respondents were directly related to breathing and circulation, including trouble breathing (70%), cough (63%), blurred vision (61%), nasal congestion (53%), headache or migraine (39%), and sore throat (37%).

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

WE ASKED: DID YOU RECEIVE ANY WARNINGS ABOUT IMPENDING HIGH WINDS AND POTENTIAL FIRE HAZARDS IN THE DAYS BEFORE THE FIRES STARTED?

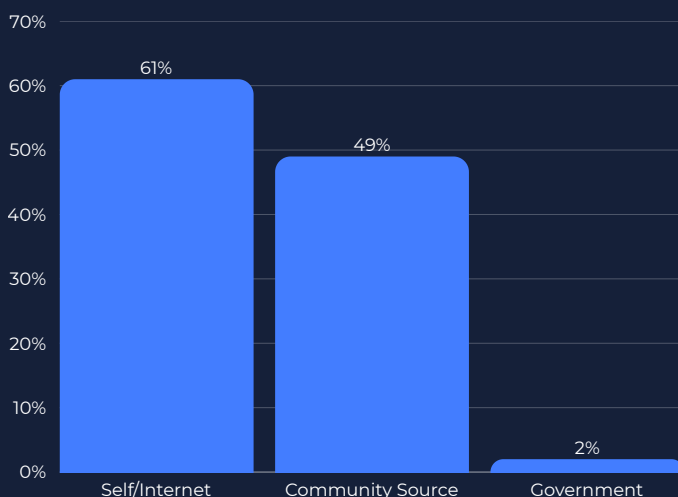


WE ASKED: IF YES, FROM WHERE ?



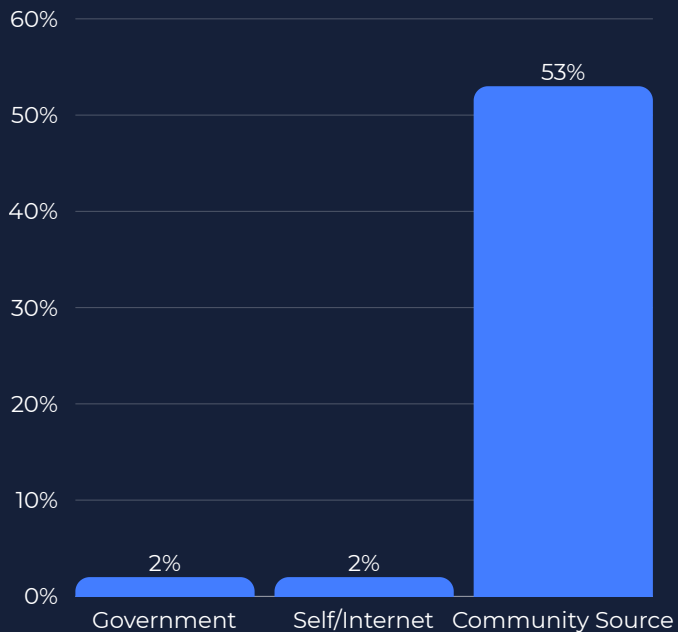
Respondents were warned about the high winds and potential fires from several different sources, with 35% learning about the potential fires through their own research or internet, followed by a community source (23%), including mutual aid groups, friends or family, and then lastly, only 16% of respondents reported learning about the fire from a government source.

WE ASKED: HOW DID YOU KEEP UP TO DATE ABOUT THE STATUS OF THE WINDS AND FIRES?



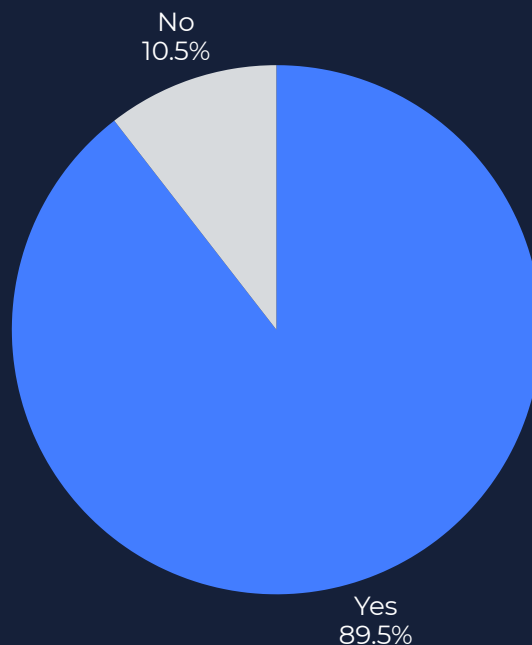
Once the fires began, respondents reported keeping up to date primarily through their own research (61%), or through a community source (49%), with only 1 respondent receiving information about the fires from the government.

WE ASKED: DID ANY PERSON/GROUP PROVIDE YOU WITH ASSISTANCE OR RESOURCES DURING THE FIRES?



The community (mutual aid groups, neighbors, friends, and family) was the primary source of material support and information, once the fires were in full effect and displacing Angelenos. 53% of respondents received their support from the community, with only 1 person receiving support from the government, or on their own.

WE ASKED: DO YOU THINK UNHOUSED FOLKS SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN DEVELOPING THE CITY/COUNTY DISASTER RESPONSE PLANS IN THE FUTURE?



About 90% of respondents agree that unhoused folks should be a part of developing a city/county disaster response and plan.

TESTIMONY

WE ASKED: WHAT TYPES OF ASSISTANCE/RESOURCES WERE MOST USEFUL TO YOU?

* EMERGENCY SUPPLIES

- Tarps - the most requested item!
- Blankets
- Zip ties
- Ropes
- Bungee cords
- Lanterns
- Batteries
- Access to electricity to charge electronics

* MEDICAL SUPPLIES

- Masks
- Oxygen canister
- Nebulizer

* SUPPLIES TO STAY WARM

- Hand warmers

* HYGIENE

- Wipes
- Trash Bags

* CLOTHING

- Rain gear
- Severe weather gear
- Shoes

* FOOD

* SHELTER

- Motel/hotel rooms
- Friends who offered shelter indoors
- Temporary shelter
- Housing

* MONETARY ASSISTANCE

- Cash-based aid
- Gift cards



TESTIMONY

WE ASKED: IF YOU USE SUBSTANCES REGULARLY, HOW HAVE THE FIRES AFFECTED YOUR ABILITY TO USE AND/OR YOUR EXPERIENCES USING THE SUBSTANCES THAT YOU TYPICALLY USE?

- I couldn't smoke crystal while having asthma attacks so I began injecting which I'm not used to/haven't done in a long time.
- I couldn't smoke well because of my throat
- so much stress makes me want to drink

WE ASKED: WHAT OTHER EFFECTS OR IMPACTS HAVE YOU NOTICED IN YOUR LIFE SINCE THE FIRES?

- Huge depression, hard to shake it, brain fog
- People look at you more if you need to make a fire for warmth
- public transportation was really bad after the fires, it was hard to get around
- I've lost work. I am a gardener
- People who normally help me were busy working on the fires. Like mutual aid workers and nonprofit workers

"I was already traumatized from previous recent fires at our camp, I'm living in constant fear that the fires will start up again. It's especially scary when you have no place to go, and you feel safe where you are, and you could lose that- makes you feel trapped."

"The impact is we're still out here struggling, the city is not helping the unhoused, so we are having to figure this out for ourselves. We cannot rely on this city to provide even the most basic of our needs - so we need to build mutual aid and we need to be recognized for the work we are doing within our communities. The sweeps have only made life harder. We are criminalized every day. But we have been actively contributing in making our communities better places to be for everyone. I want to participate. I want to be included in planning. I am a part of this city."

WE ASKED: WHAT HAVE YOU HEARD, IF ANYTHING, ABOUT THE POTENTIAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF THE FIRES?

I've read about the air quality that the air is dangerous to breathe but haven't had clear information.

Not much. I can imagine it's not good to breathe in bad air

The air quality is so much worse. I walk from here to the corner and I'm already out of breath. I've noticed the impact on others.

For older people I know the smoke isn't good for their lungs. I worry for people who live outside too, especially now that it's gotten cold.

Yes, the water and air quality are toxic

Smoke will give us all cancer soon

Toxins and asbestos from burning cars/buildings

I haven't heard anything

I heard each day outside during fire was equivalent of smoking 2 packs of cigarettes a day

The smoke and ash could affect my lungs.

NPR was very good about suggesting masks. I did not initially but eventually started while riding my bike. Riding without a mask really aggravated it and after that, I started masking.

WE ASKED: WHY SHOULD UNHOUSED FOLKS BE INCLUDED IN DEVELOPING THE CITY/COUNTY DISASTER RESPONSE PLANS IN THE FUTURE? HOW?

“

We're the ones who go through the disasters. We are the ones who experience. The city is the one who just comes up with conclusions. We could help ask better questions.

”

“

There are many empty buildings and houses that sit empty for long periods of time. Unhoused people should be allowed to stay in empty buildings during emergencies

”

“

We should have a say in what happens in our community because we're just as much a part of it as anyone.

”

“

we all know each other on the streets and know what is going on. we can provide immediate assistance and rapid response

”

“

We were unhoused before them. It takes a natural disaster for them to notice when people become unhoused.

”

“

We're part of the community

We're residents of the city, but they won't listen to us

”

“

We live in this city and we're affected just as much as everybody else, even more so because we are exposed.

”

“

they don't help us, we need to be involved so we can help ourselves

We're just like everybody else

”

“

Because then shit would actually get done

Why shouldn't we be?

”

“

We're resourceful, we could help offer thoughts

Because we deserve to be heard too

”

WE ASKED: IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH THE FIRES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON FOLKS OUTSIDE OR IN MOTELS?

“

The emotional toll and impact of the fires has been just as hard as what we had to physically deal with as a result of these fires.

”

“

I tried to go to FEMA to check if I could get any assistance and was turned away because I wasn't in the burn area

”

“

There's no such thing as being scared when you already live outside

”

“

This is my town, I've lived here all my life, people have risen up, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. People come through with patience and tolerance.

”

“

Our social circle was more overlooked, forgotten, discriminated against. Organizations did fire relief for people who lost homes, but not people who already didn't have homes, we were excluded from that.

”

“

No one is helping us, it's awful

Staff doesn't care about us

”

“

There was no response from the city. People living outside should be brought inside into hotels during fire emergencies. People living in motels should be provided with air purifiers. Our health matters. The city response was pathetic. They did next to nothing. People are suffering worse than ever.

”

“

It's overwhelming to not have a plan or a place to go. It is time the city of LA actively includes us in an emergency evacuation plan that is clear and can help unhoused people like myself in emergency situations. Here's my suggestion: emergency pop-up safety stations and shelters at metro stations throughout the city including the Sepulveda station and North Hollywood for the San Fernando Valley.

”

COMMUNITY CONVENING

Overview

The community data analysis convening was designed to ensure unhoused community members impacted by the fire and the mutual aid organizations providing care and resources, had an opportunity to collectively analyze the survey data we have gathered alongside the core research team. We believe in creating a process where those who are historically and intentionally excluded from public health and medical research, city planning, and emergency response, can see themselves in the data, the story being crafted, and the research process beyond as mere “subjects”, and instead as active participants shaping and guiding all aspects of research and emergency response. Drawing from popular education and participatory action frameworks, **the convening was rooted in the following principles:**

1

All of us make, share, and use knowledge everyday to face problems, tell stories, and build solutions, but not all of our knowledge is valued or legitimated the same.

2

Academic institutions, public and corporate researchers, and other pieces of the non-profit industrial complex often hold too much power over shaping how community experiences are represented and known.

3

Doing our own research can be a part of a process of practicing self-determination through strategically challenging hegemonic narratives and authority, and bolstering the experiences, vision, and demands of our communities.

The specific goals of the community data convening were to:

- 1 Collectively analyze the initial fire impact survey data collected by our team to identify points of resonance and potential dissonance, new ideas for analysis.
- 2 Create a forum where unhoused people and mutual aid groups impacted and responsive to the wildfire crisis and its further could further discuss, share stories, and organize together about their experiences
- 3 Propose and collectively refine a process for mutual aid or other grassroots collectives to conduct similar community/people's research projects
- 4 Identify priorities and processes for the completion and dissemination of an external final report about the survey data and the reflections emerging from this convening

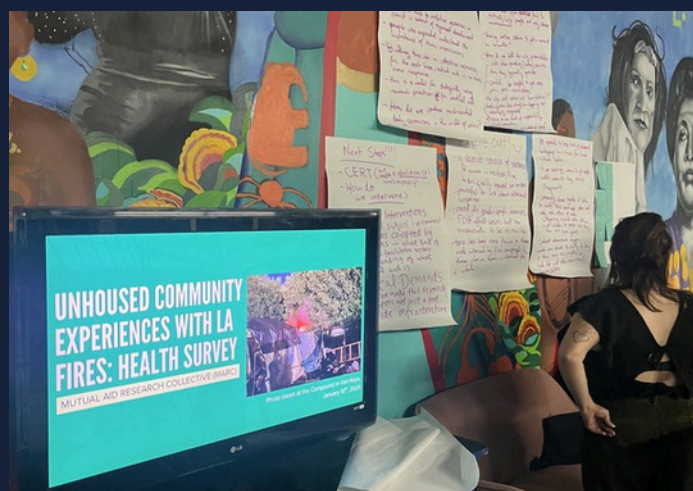
The community data analysis session occurred on Thursday, September 11th, from 6-9pm at the Sidewalk Project in downtown Los Angeles. Around twenty housed and unhoused attendees - representing the majority of the groups involved in the data collection, and several other mutual aid groups active in supporting unhoused residents during the fires - were present at the convening. Geographically, the groups present were engaged in mutual aid efforts spanning the South Bay to the San Fernando Valley, West LA to Pasadena and Altadena, and numerous neighborhoods in between. Two MARC members were assigned to conduct participant-observation of the gathering and take de-identified ethnographic fieldnotes of the attendees' discussion, dynamics, and participation with everyone's consent.

The session had 5 main components:

1 Collective Grounding, Community Agreements, and Context of the Survey	2 Overview of Initial Findings, Emergent Themes, and Data Displays	3 Description of the Community Action Research Methodology and Process
4 Collective Data Analysis Activity	5 Discussion: • Mutual Aid Focus Group Data Analysis • Fire Survey Community Report Backs • Organizing Emergency preparedness research and planning clusters • Collaborating on future surveys or community action research	

Hosting the convening at the The Sidewalk Project day center was an intentional choice. The center had been an important site for coordination between mutual aid groups during the wildfires, and has often served as a place of respite during crisis. As our unhoused neighbors fled from the fires, many found shelter, supplies, and community at the center when Sidewalk kept its doors open 24/7 during those initial days. More than this, as a group founded and led by formerly or currently unhoused people, Sidewalk remains committed to an ethos of mutual aid and is, at its core, a crucible for community.

At the beginning of the community convening, all participants received a packet containing the selected data displays to be analyzed during the session and a copy of the survey instrument. Participants were encouraged to look through it and begin thinking through questions or thoughts they might have about the survey or data, as everyone spent time eating, meeting, and connecting.



After one of the mutual aid organizers offered a grounding poem and group breathing exercise that invited people to take stock of their experiences of and since the fires, MARC members used a presentation projected on a TV to provide an overview of the survey, methodology, and initial data. Following a brief period of questions and discussions, MARC facilitators divided all of the attendees into four groups of five people each to process, digest, and discuss the presentation.



Some guiding questions were offered to anchor the small-group discussions:



After about 20 minutes of discussion, the groups came back together to report back the themes and highlights of their conversations; afterwards, common findings and next steps were synthesized collectively. The following section describes in more detail the results of those discussions through the notes and observations of the MARC ethnographers.

Community Convening Results

The data analysis session provided a provocation for both collective remembering and collective organizing among the groups present. In conversation with each other, attendees realized all of the things that they were asked or required to do to ensure folks' safety and survival during the first several days of the fires and the weeks after. Discussing the data also spurred attendees toward the anticipation of future disasters, and reflection on what strategies, infrastructure, and knowledge can be composted from the fire response for the next one.

The following sections summarize the **primary themes** that emerged across the small-group discussions, large-group share-outs, and organic questions and comments by attendees during the convening.

A. THE FIRES AS A STATE OF EXCEPTION? OR DISPLACEMENT & ABANDONMENT AS USUAL

Attendees recounted together throughout the convening **their sense of how the city and county response towards unhoused people during the fires was abysmal.** In multiple parts of the city, housed and unhoused attendees recalled how sweeps of encampments were still underway during the acute period of the fires - representatives of one mutual aid group narrated how an encampment sweep was only postponed because the sanitation team could not make it through the fire traffic. **Another mutual aid organizer recalled how unhoused people staying at an Inside Safe shelter just inside the evacuation zone in Hollywood were forced out for the night without clearly communicated plans about where they could go or how to get there;** transportation was coordinated for dozens of the shelter residents through a large Signal chat. Unhoused attendees also mentioned that the usual needlessly carceral rules of Inside Safe were applied in similar ways during the fires: people were prohibited from bringing DIY and mass-produced air purifiers into their rooms, despite the clear health indications for doing so.

This **felt sense of abandonment toward unhoused people** was expressed by several participants through reflections that juxtaposed the services, resources, and discourses for people in the Pacific Palisades and Altadena made newly unhoused by the fires with what chronically unhoused people received. The attendees present all rejected these **“deservingness politics”** and the false binary they generate, and felt frustrated at how city and non-profit agencies were actively trafficking in it.

For example, three mutual aid groups described how unhoused people they support were denied from city emergency shelters because they were effectively ‘means tested out’ and told they weren’t who this is for. Another participant who was part of an Altadena group described how she had seen FEMA resources going mainly to people who lost their homes, and not to unhoused people living there who also lost their possessions. “

At the same time, some attendees did remark on ways that the fires allowed for a **“state of exception”** that made new forms of support and care possible. One mutual aid organizer mentioned that **“During the emergency we were able to get a lot more unhoused folks into motel rooms - usually the biggest barrier to doing that is people not having IDs, but that distinction of who is housed and unhoused got suspended for a time.”** While inhalers are often hard to procure, during the fires there was a mass supply available through donations made to distribution hubs. The Sidewalk Project’s strategy of providing oxygen to people outside (normally a resource offered to support overdose response) was repurposed during the fires and also lauded.

B. APPRECIATION FOR THE SURVEY DATA AND CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK ON THE METHODOLOGY

For the groups present who had not previously participated in the development or implementation of the survey tool, the majority expressed appreciation for the thoughtful approach taken by MARC and admiration that the researcher-organizers found the capacity to take on this project while also doing mutual aid in the aftermath of the fires. An attendee from a group who did not participate in the research but was actively providing mutual aid during the fire gestured toward the challenges of balancing research with response:

“This reiterates to me how important the research is - I don’t know how anyone who is not unhoused who smokes crystal who would have told me that piece [about how the fire impacted drug use habits]. So much of what we’re learning here reiterates that this process is something we should always be doing.”

An unhoused attendee appreciated the focus:

“on the dissemination of information, what we were worried about or not; folks kinda knew where I was but weren’t taking that many precautions; people who were unhoused didn’t know, and now we are seeing similar things with ICE...The more informed folks were, the better off they were, but there is so much of a gap there around how stuff is being communicated.”

While the majority of the feedback was positive, recommendations also came out of the small-group discussions for areas and approaches that could be considered more thoroughly in future work. One participant mentioned that they

“appreciated the substance use being included, but thought it could go deeper – for example, did your supplier or source of your supply change because of the fire? [Our group] did see what the survey reflects in its data in terms of many people switching from smoking to IV use, and as a result we were seeing more overdoses and abscesses.”

That same participant also suggested addressing more intentionally how the fires negatively impacted the livelihoods and wellbeing of unhoused sex workers - **“you can’t make a living if you can’t be outside.”** There was also interest from attendees on knowing more about how gender may have impacted people’s experiences with the fire (given that, for example, some community hubs and resources are designated specifically for trans-women and femmes) as well as how language ability may have affected non-English speaking people’s access to information.

Lastly, there was self-critique shared by MARC members about the political utility of the data. One researcher regretted that “we weren’t able to seize the moment like we should [with this research]; **I wish the results of this survey could have been mobilized closer to the fires to maybe support demands for an eviction moratorium or city-provided motel/hotel vouchers for people living outside.**” Overall, though, to use the words of one participant, the sentiment from the convening group was that **“This is a model for strategically using research practices for mutual aid.”**

C. INCLUSION AND CENTERING OF UNHOUSED PEOPLE’S SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE IN FUTURE DISASTER RESPONSE

More than any other question and data visualization, attendees were deeply struck by the responses as to whether and why unhoused people should be included in disaster response planning. In both large and small group discussions, housed and unhoused participants all agreed that unhoused people have a uniquely situated knowledge of how to navigate and prepare for environmental disasters and “they should be welcomed as a resource”.

One housed mutual aid organizer remembered “how woefully underprepared folks who were housed were [for the fires],” and emphasized that “one of the main reasons I do this work is because of the mutual part of it: I learn from my unhoused friends how they are living.”

An unhoused participant shared that they should be included because “we’re people, and also because we know more and we’re outside and we face things first. I think that’s really important.”

Attendees also contrasted - with real frustration - how unhoused people were doing much more for each other than most housed people and the broader city and non-profit response were. "People who didn't have much used everything they had, and people who hoard their resources did nothing. That taught us so much - what will it take to confront that?"

LESSONS LEARNED FOR FUTURE DISASTERS AND FOR D. STRENGTHENING AND SUSTAINING MUTUAL AID INFRASTRUCTURE

The small- and large-group conversations spurred many of the group representatives to recall the challenges of equitably and responsively distributing supplies and resources during moments like the fires, and honestly evaluate their progress together on this front. Participants mentioned how a lot of impressive infrastructure was generated during the fires - multiple resource hubs, an all volunteer ride-share and transportation chat, food distribution maps - but **"The thing about crisis is that if we build things during crisis, they often die shortly after."** Most responses acknowledged ruefully that everyone knows long-term planning is important and feels like they should be doing more, and recognized the obstacles to transforming acute response infrastructures and strategies into more durable forms.

"There were a lot of attempts, but what got in the way was the chaos; things developed without thoughtfulness. It kinda worked, but it could have been better; I didn't even do that much mutual aid because we were trying to help but there were too many cooks. This is why coalition work is so important, it was already in the works before the fires and then we realized that it's actually really important for us to do coalition work. To help share knowledge and resource; having a network in place" - Mutual aid volunteer from a group involved in the data collection

These conversations were the most animated of the convening. What emerged from this discussion was a shared desire to consolidate efforts into coalitions that can manage bigger projects together like an accessible platform that facilitates the sharing of resources and skills or a communal kitchen, as well as a recognition of the importance of building efforts now around organic hubs where unhoused people tend to gather in the wake of disaster like Metro stations. **One housed mutual aid organizer summed it up like this:**

"Large scale mutual aid survival work is going to be more and more what we need. Each time people see it they want to get involved, and we have to think about that capacity as we grow without getting too ahead of ourselves."

E. THE TENSE POSITIONING OF A PEOPLE'S MUTUAL AID DISASTER RESPONSE VIS-À-VIS THE STATE

Lastly, all attendees present connected over their mutual indignation about how the State abuses the willingness and responsiveness of mutual aid groups to get away with its neglect. **In the words of an unhoused participant, “There were 3 questions, right:**

- (1) how did you receive warnings [about the fires]**
- (2) how did you stay up to date, and**
- (3) who gave you resources?’ The third is the most involved and that’s where the involvement of the city totally fell off.**

Mutual aid groups were the only people who did anything - they did all 3.” While participants were proud of their mutual aid work and largely invested in the idea of launching a **“People’s Disaster Response”** that could carry forward these efforts, these reflections also called attention to longstanding tensions around groups’ desire to hold the city accountable to do more with its resources while also building autonomous mechanisms that assure that people get what they need to survive. During the large-group discussion, one mutual aid organizer took the floor: “It’s important to keep in mind that the city and the state take us into account when they make their plans – they say ‘these groups will be there to do their little thing when we aren’t there’, and they understand us.

They call us harm reduction, and it raises the question of who is causing the harm?” (“That’s right, ask the right question!” someone else adds animatedly).

Hearing this, another participant recalled how during the fires, a viral tweet came out that revealed how the Los Angeles Mayor’s Office asked a local mutual aid and disability justice group MaskBloc LA for N95 masks during the fires; the room burst into laughter, but an anger was palpable under it. Another mutual aid organizer jumped in:

“Something I keep thinking about – who is doing the harm? We need political education whenever these ‘flare-ups’ happen. Flare-ups are entry points - different related disasters are all part of the disaster of colonialism and capitalism, which can’t be lost. Can this be our anchor? We live in an ongoing disaster, I felt that this year. You can’t catch your breath. It’s painful and violent, but also it’s a point of opportunity. It’s showing the reality that we live this everyday.”

Attendees came to an informal consensus that if the city knows it is going to fail unhoused communities and assumes mutual aid groups will fill the gaps, the path ahead is exploiting that dependence on mutual aid: “If the city refuses to do the work, the city has to make concessions. If they are not willing to do the work, what do they need to give up? Space? Property? Resources?”

The convening ended resolutely with an invitation to take the discussion from here back to everyone’s groups and think about what groups have the capacity to build together. In the words of the last mutual aid attendee to speak:

“From COVID, to the fires, to the ICE raids, there is something emerging that we should wrap our minds around, which is a scary thing to do because it means more responsibility, and we all already hold a lot: we know who actually is going to be there for you. It’s your neighbor: we keep us safe. This proposal of a people’s disaster response assembly- getting people together besides ourselves who may be interested in figuring those things out with more preparation, so that we can be more coordinated next time - I have never seen a call citywide, but do we feel like we want to be a part of that? Can we help facilitate that?”



METHODOLOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE MUTUAL-AID RESEARCH

- 1**
Ensure that survey questions are accessible, clear, relevant, and include spaces where people can provide information that the question does not cover
- 2**
Be mindful of the impact that sensitive questions may have on the respondent and prepare interviewers to practice active listening
- 3**
Compensate respondents fairly for the time that they devote to the survey
- 4**
Ensure that survey is aligned with community partners' mission and values by regularly sharing your progress with them for feedback
- 5**
Fielding surveys takes time and resources – ensure that research projects do not pose an additional burden or take resources away from organizations' regular obligations and commitments
- 6**
Think about the audience and goals of the research in developing questions
- 7**
Create spaces for interviewers to debrief about their fielding experiences to determine if any major changes need to be made to the survey
- 8**
Use the research to support existing advocacy efforts and devote time into publicizing your hard work and people's investment of time and trust
- 9**
Create opportunities for community members to be involved in discussing the findings and next steps with the research
- 10**
A combination of question types will be helpful
 - * Quantitative/closed-ended questions are easier to analyze and clearer to present
 - * Qualitative/open-ended questions provide rich insights and opportunities for the respondent to take a more active role in shaping the direction of the findings

GLOSSARY

MUTUAL AID

There are many ways to understand mutual aid, and many different ways that mutual aid looks and exists in Los Angeles. Dean Spade calls mutual aid the “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. These systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse” (Spade, D. [2020]. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during this Crisis (and the Next)*). Put more simply, it’s the recognition and practice that “we got us”— **mutual aid is all the ways that ordinary people & communities build bold and creative ways to autonomously meet each other’s needs, share resources, and support those experiencing vulnerability, as a part of movements struggling for broader systemic change.**

UNHOUSED

We use “unhoused” throughout this report when describing people living outside or in vehicles to call attention to how this condition is the deliberate outcome of “specific policies and actions through which the unhousing of people is produced and reproduced for financial profit and with political legitimacy” (Roy, A., Graziani, T., & Stephens, P. [2020]. “Unhousing the Poor: Interlocking Regimes of Racialized Policing.” *The Square One Project*). Homelessness is not a passive or natural phenomenon— **the majority of us do not control our own housing because of the for-profit nature of housing in the US, and historical + ongoing processes of racialized dispossession and organized abandonment. It is through eviction or displacement that housing precarity becomes houselessness.**

THE STATE

When we mention the State in this report and discuss it in relation to mutual aid, we are not talking about California. Nor are we just talking about a specific group of people in power like government officials or an administration, or even the government itself. Instead, in step with social theorists, we’re actually talking about multiple things - the State refers to how society is organized and structured, the material activities and ideological priorities of different institutions, how they’re watched over and regulated (or not), and how policies and laws are set and enforced in ways that impact people’s ability to meet their needs (or not). Crucially, the State and its capacities are not fixed - they can “develop and change over time” based on the struggles and actions of people and communities (Gilmore, R. W. [2008]. “Forgotten places and the seeds of grassroots planning.” **The State, then, is the whole assemblage of institutions, regulatory bodies, officials, policies, and resource flows that has the capacity to invest and disinvest in communities and disaster response.**

PARTICIPANT-BASED OBSERVATION

Participant-Observation is an ethnographic research methodology where the researcher (or researchers) generate data about a specified subject through direct immersion and experience in the phenomena under study. Researchers put themselves in and alongside the people and social dynamics they are studying, and record their observations and impressions as written fieldnotes, which are later sorted and critically analyzed. Put more simply, participant-observation is **“deep hanging out”** (Rosaldo, R. [1994]. “Anthropology and ‘the Field.’”).