

# Survey of coastal residents shows Gulf oil spill has significant impact on families

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As the acute phase of the Gulf oil spill transitions to a chronic phase, marked by long-term challenges to the public health, environment and economy, researchers at Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness interviewed over 1,200 adults living within 10 miles of the Gulf Coast in Louisiana and Mississippi, in collaboration with the Children's Health Fund and The Marist Poll of Poughkeepsie, NY. The survey, conducted by telephone in July, after the Deepwater Horizon well was capped, found evidence of significant and potentially lasting impact of the disaster on the health, mental health, and economic fortunes of residents and their children and on the way they live their everyday lives. The findings have implications for health and economic policies going forward.

Among the key survey findings:

- Over 40% of adults living within ten miles of the coast said they have experienced direct exposure to the oil spill or clean-up effort. Within this group, nearly 40% reported physical symptoms of skin irritations and [respiratory problems](#), which they attributed to the oil spill.
- Over one-third of parents report that their children have experienced either physical symptoms or mental health distress as a consequence of the oil spill.

- One in five households report a drop in income since the oil spill, and 8% report job loss. These losses were most likely to hit those who were already economically vulnerable: households with incomes under \$25,000 a year.
- More than one-quarter (26.6%) of coastal residents said they thought they might have to move away from the Gulf Coast. Among those earning less than \$25,000, the figure was 36.3%. Children whose parents think they may move are almost three times more likely to have mental health distress than are children whose parents do not expect to move.
- More than 70% of parents report children spending less time swimming, boating and playing in the sand; 21% say their kids are spending less overall time playing outdoors.
- Coastal residents had more favorable assessments and trust in their local and state officials and in the U.S. Coast Guard than they did in BP or other Federal agencies.
- Slightly over half of all coastal residents felt that BP's response was "poor," and 41.3% said that the President's response to the oil spill was poor.

"Over the last few days we are seeing an effort by officials who are suggesting that, as the oil is less visible on the surface, the 'crisis is over.' Clearly, this is far from the case," says Irwin Redlener, MD, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCPD) at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health and president of the Children's Health Fund (CHF). "As shown by our survey, done after the well was capped, there is a significant and persistent public health crisis underscored by the large number of children with medical and psychological problems related to the oil disaster. These concerns will need to be assessed and

managed in these coastal communities where there are few or no pediatricians and vastly insufficient mental health professional capacity.'

The survey found a dramatic relationship between economic vulnerability and health effects. Adults with household incomes under \$25,000 were by far the most likely to report physical and mental health effects for themselves and also among their children.

"Much the way Hurricane Katrina had its greatest effect on those with the least, the oil spill is also having a greater impact on those coastal residents who are 'economically vulnerable,' says David Abramson, PhD, MPH, director of Research at NCDP and assistant professor of clinical sociomedical sciences at the Mailman School. "In an area still recovering from the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, the oil spill represents a significant test of a population's resiliency."

Dr. Redlener, a pediatrician and professor at the Mailman School, outlined a number of implications for policymakers and others: "Guidelines need to be developed, with active participation of relevant federal agencies, with respect to the short- and long-term health risks of remaining in affected communities. This should include recommendations, based on known science, on when families would be advised to move out of the community entirely." He also believes BP should provide funds to state and local agencies involved with providing assessment and care to affected families. "Children are particularly susceptible to the consequences of this disaster and need to have special resources focused on their needs."

The National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia's Mailman School, which designed the survey, intends to follow a cohort of at least 1,000 children and adults in the region to determine the continuing health and mental health consequences of the oil spill. Meanwhile the

Children's Health Fund will bring badly needed mobile pediatric care to the region shortly. "There are literally no pediatricians in the lower two-thirds of Plaquemines Parish," notes Dr. Redlener, "and this is one of the worst hit areas."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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