

## Oil Spill: The Psychological Toll

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We'll be debating the long-term environmental impact of the BP oil spill for years, if not decades. But we can know one thing for sure right now: the spill is exacting psychological harm on the people of the Gulf coast.

That's the conclusion of the first major survey of Gulf coast residents conducted since the well was capped on July 16. The new survey—carried out between July 19 and 25 by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health—found serious stress among those living on the coast, along with reports of medical problems believed to be connected to the oil spill. (You can download the survey [here](#).) Here's what **Dr. Irwin Redlener, the director of the center and president of the Children's Health Fund**, told the *New York Times*:

“There's been a very overt effort by BP and the Coast Guard to project a sense that the crisis is over, but this is far from the case. Our survey shows a persistent and overwhelming level of anxiety among families living near the coast, driven by both medical symptoms in their children as well as a substantial level of psychological stress.”

Some of the key findings of the study, which included 1,200 coastal residents in Louisiana and Mississippi, with a particular focus on children:

- Over 40% of the population living within 10 miles of the coast had experienced some direct exposure to the oil spill.
- Over one-third of parents reported that their children had experienced either physical symptoms or mental health distress due to the spill.
- One in five households had seen their income decrease as a result of the spill. 8% have lost jobs—and only 5% of coastal residents reported receiving cash or gift cards from BP.
- Over one-quarter of the coastal residents think they may have to move from the area because of the spill.
- The poor were hit the most—coastal households earning less than \$25,000 a year were more likely to report having lost income than those earning more, more likely to think they would have to move and more likely to report physical and mental health effects among their children.

The survey is an early attempt to gauge the human cost of the spill, and it's far from definitive. It's difficult now to figure out what physical or emotional problems might actually be linked to the spill—though Redlener differentiates children who had emotional or mental problems before the spill from the number who were affected by the disaster. There are other interesting tidbits that show how the spill has affected different states on the Gulf coast differently. Three-quarters of Mississippi residents believe it is not safe to eat local seafood, while a little more than half of Louisiana residents believe local seafood is safe. (The fact that the Louisiana fishing industry is significantly larger than that of Mississippi might account for some of the difference.) Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal gets the highest marks for his handling of the spill and his trustworthiness (78% of Louisiana residents trusted him a “great deal” or “good deal”), while 48% of respondents and just 31% said they trusted BP officials. (Which is about 31% higher than I would have expected.)

Redlener's survey jibes with what I've found during my reporting in the Gulf region—some of it for a story appearing in this week's paper (and iPad!) edition of Time. (The full version is behind a pay moat, but you can read an abridged version.) The intense anxiety resulting from the oil spill is due in part to all the unknowns: when will the spill be capped? How much oil will flow? What will the long-term environmental, health and economic effects be? We're starting to get the answers to some of those questions—but not to all of them. The cash-strapped Gulf states were struggling to provide proper mental health care even before the spill—now they're stretched beyond the breaking point, and it's not clear where additional money will come from. (BP hasn't spent much on mental health compensation, and new pay czar Kenneth Feinberg has said that mental health claims won't be a part of his process.) The oil has stopped flowing, but the damage has just begun.

**Read more:** <http://ecocentric.blogs.time.com/2010/08/03/oil-spill-the-psychological-toll/#ixzz0vZPOWhIU>