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Stories from the Outside: Oregon Wildfires 2020

Maude Hines

Portland State University, mhines@pdx.edu

Marta Petteni

Portland State University

Stefanie Knowlton

Portland State University

Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, Portland State University

Street Roots

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STORIES FROM THE OUTSIDE: OREGON WILDFIRES 2020

The most destructive wildfires in Oregon's history spread across the state in September 2020, burning more than 1 million acres and 4,000 homes. At least 11 people died, 40,000 were evacuated, and about 500,000 were in evacuation warning areas. Air quality was so hazardous that it exceeded the state's Air Quality Index, pushing the state to declare a Public Health Emergency.

Local, state, and federal emergency management and relief organizations responded to the devastation. Those impacted needed food, shelter, and clean air to breathe.

All those who needed assistance were in a similar position — they were without homes and needed respite from the smoky conditions. When providing services, however, some relief efforts distinguished between those who were housed before the fires, and those who were unhoused.

At least one shelter denied relief to those they identified as “homeless” or “transients.” Some experiencing homelessness were left out altogether -- never hearing about any relief efforts. Others would rather face the smoke than the treatment they feared inside a shelter.



STORIES FROM THE OUTSIDE:

Stories from the Outside centers the voices of people experiencing homelessness during the 2020 Oregon wildfire season. PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, in partnership with the Street Roots Ambassadors program, surveyed 73 people in the Portland area in June 2021. Ambassadors sought out Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color to ensure their voices were represented as BIPOC residents are disproportionately impacted by homelessness.

Many respondents felt disconnected and left out of emergency relief efforts. These are their stories.

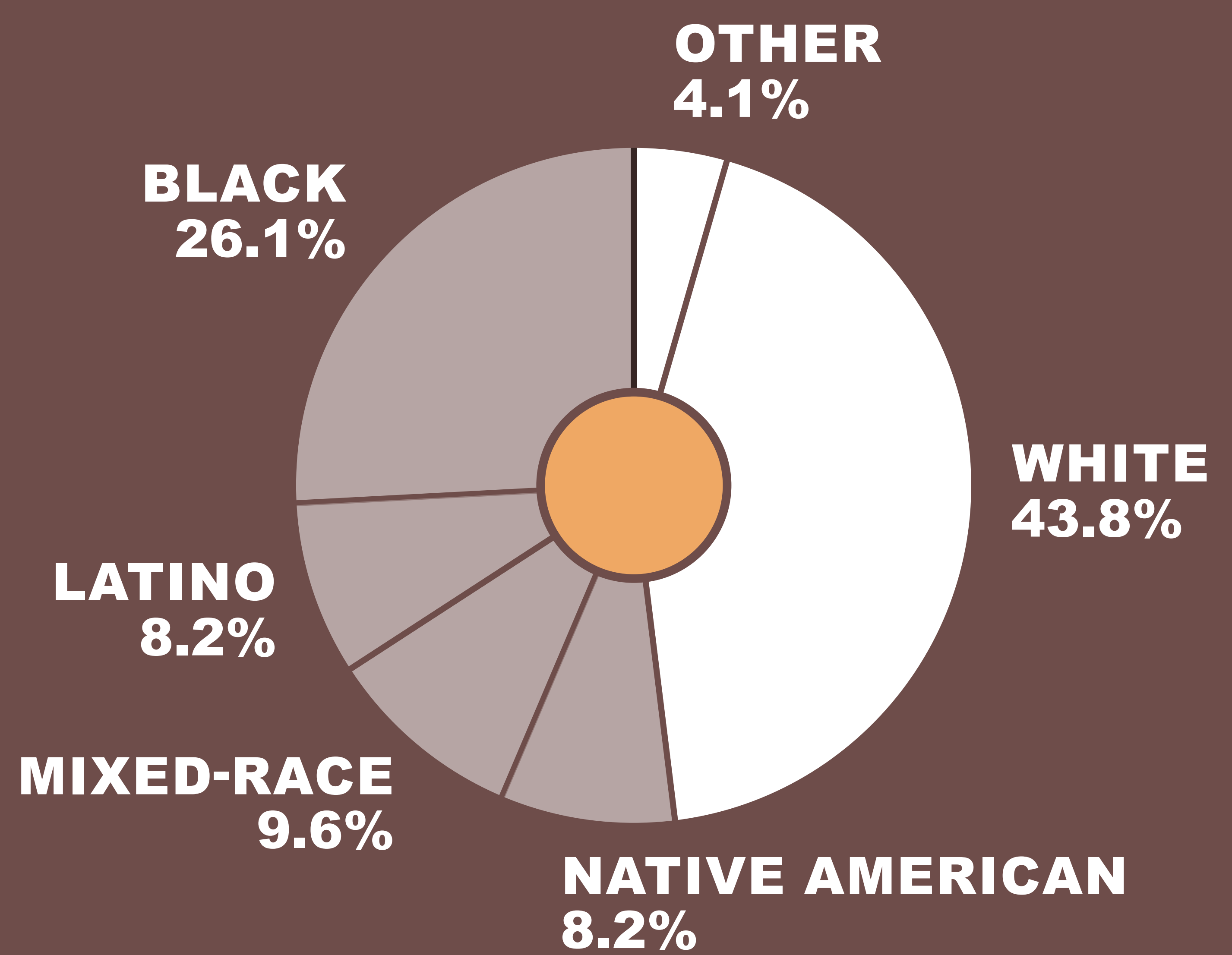
73

unhoused people were interviewed by Street Root Ambassadors

52%

identified as BIPOC

Demographics of respondents:



What was your experience during the wildfires?

“I had burning eyes and trouble breathing”

“Could hardly see or breathe”

“Can’t breathe well, asthma was bad, had seizures”

37%

of respondents reported difficulty breathing

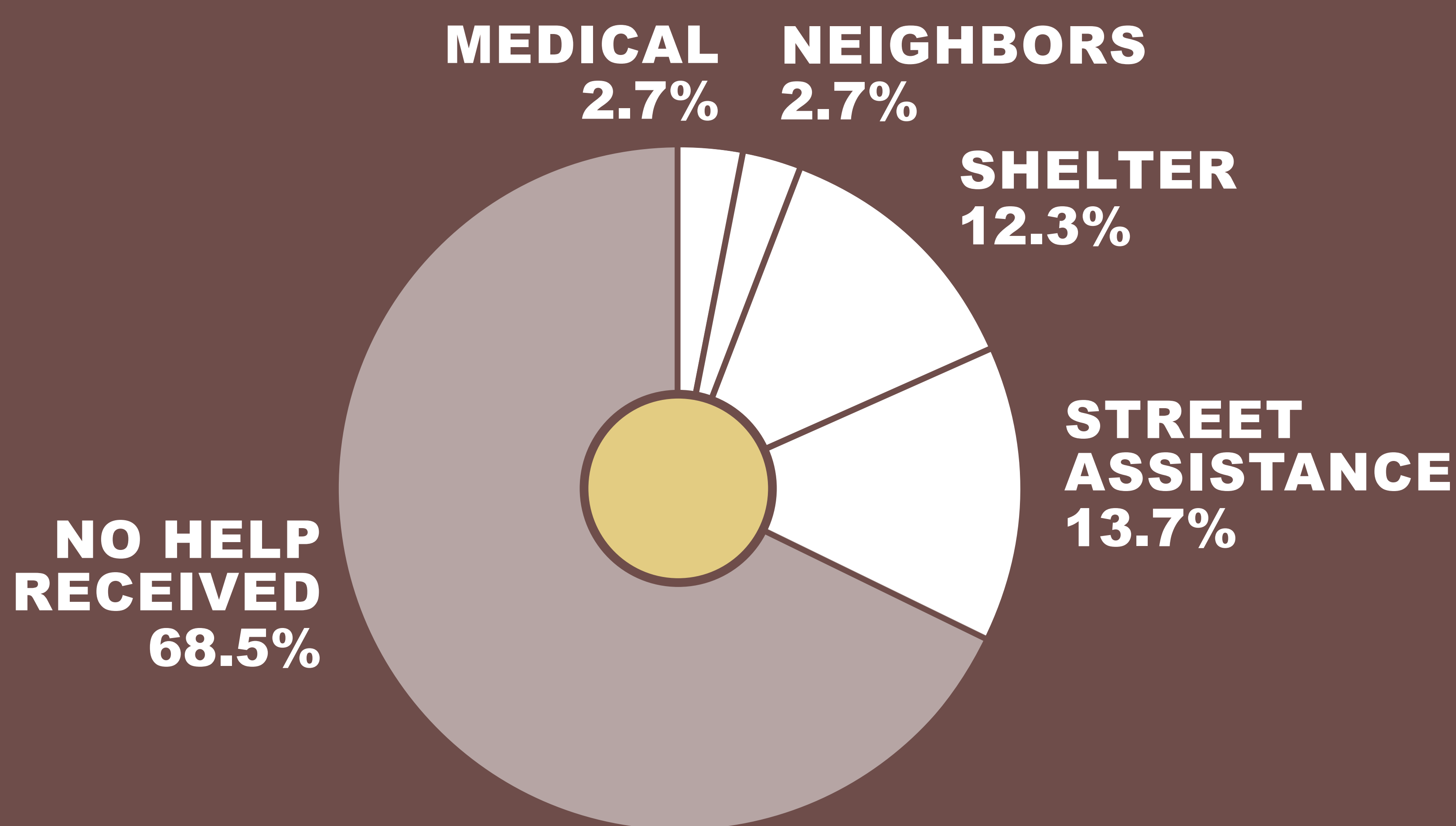
“Horrible, almost died”

“Not being helped”



STORIES FROM THE OUTSIDE:

Did you receive any type of help?



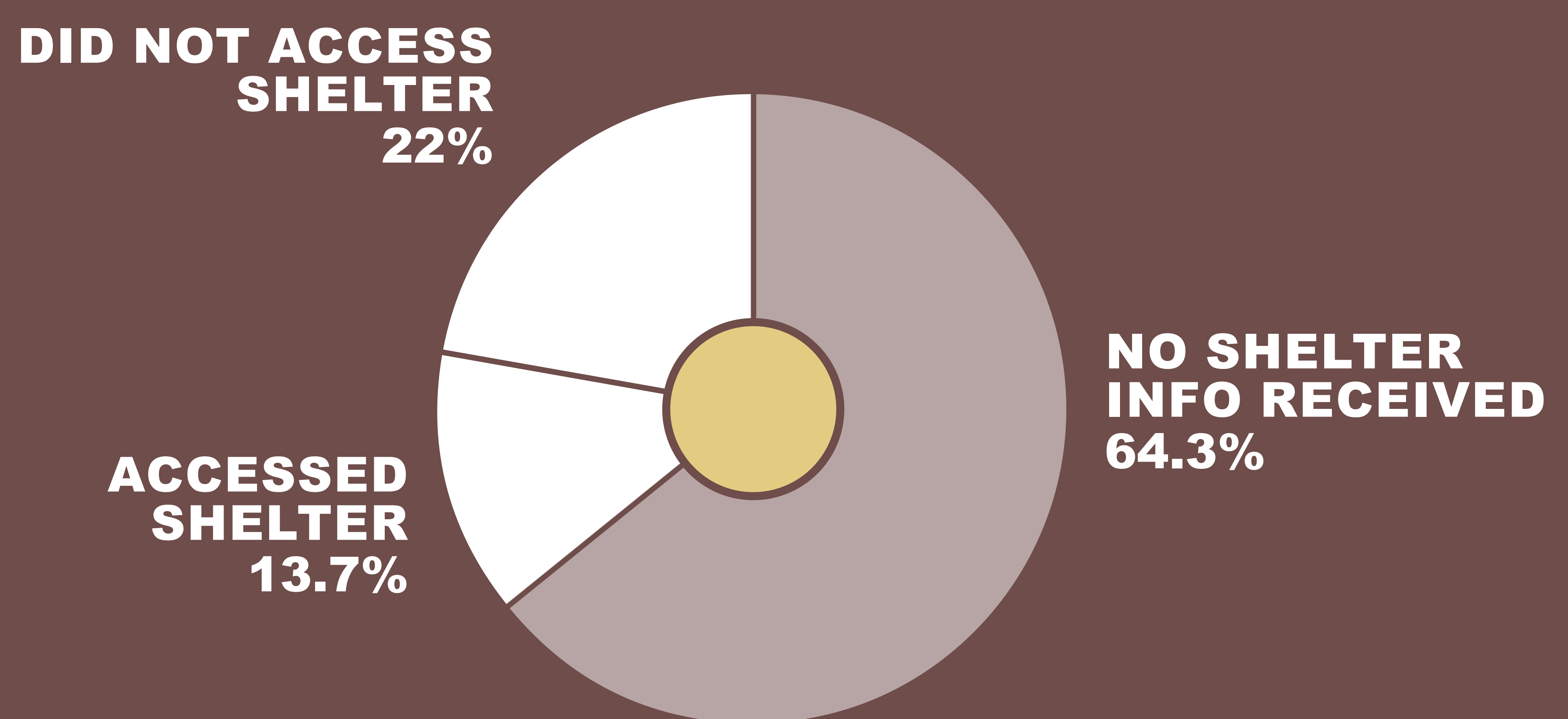
75%
did not receive any information during the wildfires

69%
did not receive any type of help during the wildfires and smoke

50%
rated the quality of help as 1 on a scale of 1-10

nearly **65%**
did not hear about emergency shelters

Did you go to a shelter?



Why did you not access the emergency shelters?

“The shelters were full, not enough for even half of us”

“Could not get through to 211”

“Had nowhere for my things”

“Impossible to get in anyways”

“Don’t want the stress that they bring”

“We never know out here what shelters are there”



STORIES FROM THE OUTSIDE:

Did the smoke impact your health?

“Coughed for weeks”

“I struggled to breathe”

“COPD: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease”

50%

Nearly half said the smoke impacted their health

“I had to go in [to the hospital] four times”

“Eyes hurt for days”

What would make you feel more supported in the community during future emergencies?

“More outreach, resources, and information”

“Nothing, no one listens anyways”

“Better shelters”

“Motel vouchers”

“For people to treat us like humans and let us inside”

“Assistance with mental health and Housing”

“More help for Undocumented Immigrants”

“Visible presence of emergency personnel”

“More Resources for people who do not trust shelters”

“More kindness from people”

