

# Poor and elderly die in US heat wave

Shannon Jones  
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As thousands sweltered in the recent heat wave in the US midwest the failure of electrical power systems heightened the suffering, particularly for poor and elderly victims. At least 44 people died from the heat over the past week, including 10 in Cincinnati, Ohio, 16 in Illinois and 13 in St. Louis, Missouri. In several states there were critical shortages of electricity and threats of power blackouts.

In West Peoria, Illinois a neighbor found the body of an 82-year-old woman inside her home. The air-conditioner had broken and the temperature was 102 degrees Fahrenheit. A 79-year-old Chicago woman died while trapped in a stalled elevator in her apartment building.

In the impoverished city of East St. Louis, Illinois, at least two people died from the heat. George Foster, an emergency coordinator for the city said, "A lot of seniors are on a fixed income and don't want to pay the electric bill that goes up when you use your air-conditioner."

"I can't imagine living for prolonged periods without air conditioning," said Dr. Phillips Burch, the medical examiner across the Mississippi River in St. Louis. Authorities predicted more would die in East St. Louis, where temperatures are expected to remain unusually hot until next week.

The past weekend was the deadliest in Cincinnati. Five of heat victims in the city were found in homes where temperatures were near 100. One heat victim, a 99-year-old woman, was found dead in her home with a core body temperature of 107. The majority of victims were over 64 years of age and six suffered from heart disease or other chronic conditions. All the victims' homes lacked air-conditioning or adequate ventilation. One elderly victim had an air-conditioner, but wasn't using it because of the cost. She died of heat stroke Saturday. In addition, dozens of Cincinnati residents were treated at local hospitals for heat exhaustion and

heat stroke.

"We all know that a tornado or hurricane is a deadly natural event," said Hamilton County Coroner Carl Parrott, "but people don't realize calm, still, beastly hot summer weather has lethal potential."

City officials in Cincinnati have declared a "heat emergency." However the measures taken to help poor and elderly residents have been minimal. Public buildings have been opened as "cooling centers" and some free fans have been distributed. However medical experts note that at temperatures over 90 fans do little to cool the body.

The media generally presented the deaths as a product of the forces of nature. Nowhere to be found was any consideration of how high utility rates, cutbacks in federal spending for housing and energy assistance or the lack of adequate housing may have contributed to the high death toll. Officials generally appealed to individual initiative to deal with the crisis. Typical was the comment of Dr. Carl Parrott who declared, "Unless people modify their behavior there will be more deaths. We need people to look out for each other and encourage people to get inside cooler environments."

In addition to highlighting the inadequate living conditions of large sections of the American population the recent heat has focused attention on the serious deficiencies in the electrical power generating system. Since early July several regions have faced critical shortages of electricity. There have been a number of blackouts across the US, including the cutoff of power to working class neighborhoods in Manhattan in early July. The seriousness of the problem is underscored by the fact that this summer's heat has not, in most cases, been as severe as in previous years.

High demand for electricity prompted Indianapolis Power & Light to talk of a "critical shortage" and warn of possible rolling blackouts. In Ohio two major utility companies were forced to cut power to industrial

customers, including steel mills and other heavy manufacturing industries.

In Cincinnati officials of Cinergy, the local power company, called on residents to take emergency measures to conserve electricity or face possible blackouts. The utility cut off power to several large industrial customers to ease the strain on the system.

The increasing frequency of power shortages has drawn the attention of the Clinton administration. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson recently announced a six-point program to reduce the threat of power blackouts. However the proposals amounted to little more than a call to study the problem.

Meanwhile the White House is moving ahead with plans to add to the existing chaos in the power industry by moving to decentralize the generation of electricity. At a conference of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners last week in San Francisco Energy Secretary Richardson called for legislation to make the power industry more competitive and efficient.

Several states, including New York, have already moved to institute deregulation on their own. By 2001 private companies in New York will be able to compete in the generation and sale of electricity. The measure threatens to compound a situation where utilities have failed to add power-generating capacity sufficient to meet growing demand. Inevitably the introduction of market competition will lead to a form of economic rationing as poor and working class customers are forced to cut use in the face of soaring electrical costs.



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