

US: Carbon monoxide deaths on the rise as economy sours

Ed Hightower
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With each passing week, the global economic slump brings news of further deterioration in the conditions of the working class. From foreclosures and layoffs to declining pensions, workers face increasing difficulty, even as the ruling elite prepares more handouts for large corporations and the wealthy.

One stark indicator of just how much the working class is pushed to the limit was indicated in a January 6 report from MSNBC.com. The report shows that increasing numbers of American families, facing utility shutoffs and winter storms, are heating their homes by dangerous means with deadly results.

The cutoff of electric and/or gas service subjects affected households, particularly in the cold winter months, to the danger of house fires. But these families are also threatened with illness and potential death by a silent killer—poisonous carbon monoxide gas.

Carbon monoxide is the leading cause of accidental poisoning deaths in US, with more than 20,000 people hospitalized and nearly 500 killed each year. The Centers for Disease Control reports that cases of carbon monoxide poisoning have been on the rise in recent years, climbing 36 percent between 2001 and 2006. This year's steep spike in utility shutoffs threatens to increase these tragic figures.

Mark Wolfe, the director of the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association (NEADA), stated that in recent years 2 to 3 percent of residential energy consumers have their power disconnected. This year, it is between 7 and 8 percent. Underscoring the rapid downward spiral of the economy, he added, "Families that were middle class last week are not middle class

anymore."

More-economically depressed areas exhibit a higher frequency of utility shutoffs and associated misery. In October, the Detroit area saw a 20 percent increase in shutoffs compared to the same month in 2007. At least 14,000 energy customers in the Detroit Metro area have had their power shut off this season.

With their main source of heat abruptly disconnected, families struggle to keep warm by employing various other sources of heat, such as kerosene heaters, gas generators and improperly maintained wood stoves and fireplaces. Such heat sources carry a heavy risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, which occurs when this byproduct of combustion accumulates in an enclosed space.

Carbon monoxide (CO) more readily binds to the hemoglobin molecules in red blood cells than does oxygen (O₂). As the odorless, invisible gas accumulates, it progressively blocks oxygen from being taken up and circulated throughout the body. Early symptoms include headache, dizziness and nausea. Carbon monoxide can quickly lead to unconsciousness, organ failure and death. It typically kills 110 Americans per day in December, 96 in January, and 76 in February.

By all indications, carbon monoxide deaths will increase this winter. A recent survey by NEADA of more than 1,200 low-income families found that almost 50 percent could not pay their entire energy bill and nearly 40 percent had already received a notice of disconnection.

A survey by the American Red Cross and the National Fire Prevention Association found that almost 80 percent of respondents worried that they would not be able to afford their heating bills this winter.

Local headlines reflect these findings. In Minneapolis, two men and a 13-year-old boy died from carbon monoxide poisoning in October when they used a gas-powered generator in their basement after their power was shut off. A mother and two teens in Paramount, California, suffered carbon monoxide poisoning in November when they heated their home with a charcoal grill.

In spite of its own reporting, the MSNBC.com article concludes that the increase in carbon monoxide poisoning is largely a question of awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide. If people only knew that certain measures to keep warm were dangerous, the problem would resolve itself. This only begs the question, as to why people resort to such desperate measures to stay warm in the first place.

The lack of public awareness about the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning is, in fact, a barometer of the primitive level of public safety, in which there is no federally sponsored program to either alert the population to the risks, or provide carbon monoxide alarms to households. As it is, cash-strapped local fire departments and other agencies are some of the only resources for informing the public.

It is, of course, a question of economic priorities. If working people could afford to heat their homes in a safe manner, they surely would. The fact that in the twenty-first century, people face death from hypothermia and carbon monoxide poisoning due to their inability to pay their utility bills serves as one more indictment of the profit system, and of the utility companies in particular.



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