Deadly heat wave exposes decaying US infrastructure

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The recent early heat wave in the US Midwest and East Coast led to at least eight deaths, mostly among elderly people, as well as a significant power failure in Detroit, exposing the advanced state of decay of US infrastructure.

Over the past week, cities in much of the Central and Eastern US experienced prolonged near-record high temperatures. In Washington, DC, temperatures reached 99 degrees Fahrenheit (37.2 Celsius); in Minneapolis 102 and Baltimore 103 (38.9 and 39.4 Celsius, respectively). The impact of the heat was compounded by high humidity.

In Tennessee, a 75-year old Memphis woman and a 60-year old man from Brighton both died as temperatures soared above 90 degrees. The woman, who had a medical condition, was found dead in her apartment. She had an air conditioner, but it was not turned on. A 59-year-old woman in Bloomington, Illinois was found dead by an air conditioner repairman. Reports say the temperature was over 100 degrees inside her home.

In Maryland, two people died over the last two weeks due to heat exposure. Kansas City, Missouri, also reported two heat-related deaths. In Wisconsin, a 69-year-old nursing home resident was found to have died last Tuesday from heat-related causes.

In Detroit, aging transformer lines failed, shutting down electricity to municipal and court offices, the convention center, museums, traffic lights, some public schools, Wayne State University and Wayne County Community College. Many public buildings remained closed on Friday as crews struggled to make repairs.

According to Detroit Mayor David Bing the decision to shut off power to government buildings was made in order to prevent a possible blackout of the entire city.

At the Detroit Institute of Art museum officials said the outage did not pose an immediate threat to the world-renowned collection, with a spokesperson saying that temperature and humidity in the building would be stable for 72 hours. After that the museum would have to find a source of emergency power generation, she added.

The outage was caused when three of five transformer lines at the antiquated Mistersky power station began to become overloaded and had to be shut down Thursday afternoon. Traffic signals went dark in downtown in the midst of rush hour, creating traffic tie-ups, and city office buildings had to be emptied.

In southwestern Michigan, the heat buckled pavement on an interstate freeway causing it to be shut down for several hours.

Heat caused a power blackout in Detroit last July, cutting off power to the downtown area for two hours. Temperatures in the city last week were well above seasonal averages but did not set a record.

The municipal electric power system is dilapidated and unstable. The city administration blames the state's budget crisis for its failure to make the required repairs.

In the northeastern US the heat caused many public schools to shut down or close early due to lack of cooling. "A lot of people were complaining," said a sixth grader at an elementary school 70 miles north of Philadelphia quoted by USA Today, "it is hard to study when it's hot out because all you're thinking about is, 'I wish I could be in air conditioning.'"

In Detroit three public schools had to be closed for lack of air conditioning and dozens of students and a teacher at a Long Island school were hospitalized due to heat exhaustion.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, air conditioning is the number one protective measure against heat-related illness and death. However, many

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people lack air conditioning, and those who do have air conditioning are often unable to turn it on because of high utility bills. In Oklahoma, where temperatures have reached 104 four times this month, the Salvation Army reported more people were seeking help with high utility bills earlier in the season.

Jim Kramper, a meteorologist with the St Louis National Weather Service, said that the seriousness of excessive heat is often underestimated and the number of deaths and illnesses it causes are under-reported. “The information is hard to gather because you have to check with doctors and hospitals and go over coroner reports,” he said. “I suspect the number of deaths is much bigger than we think.”

Dr Michael Stern, co director of the Geriatric Emergency Medicine Fellowship at New York Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center, told *ABC News*, “It’s a real public health issue. Between the 1980s and early 2000s there were more heat-related deaths than deaths from all natural disasters combined.”

Stern said the number of patients exhibiting symptoms of heat stroke had risen dramatically since the start of the heat wave. He said the elderly were most at risk, especially those on medications. Simply sitting in an apartment without air conditioning in the summer can result in heat stroke, “in a matter of hours,” he said.

Detroit Receiving Hospital reported a surge of cases of heat exhaustion. “It takes a couple of days for people to come in to the hospital,” said the chief of emergency medicine, Padraic Sweeny. “We’ve seen more, many more [heat exhaustion victims] than usual.”

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