

Concerns rise over impact of Texas power failure on spread of COVID-19

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Concerns are spreading over the potential for the disaster caused by last month's winter storm—which forced people across Texas to huddle together in homes, cars and warming shelters and wait in long lines for food and water—to lead to an increase in COVID-19 infections.

During the week that millions across Texas were without water and power, coronavirus case reporting plummeted in the state. Since then, the number of confirmed cases has risen sharply but it is still too early to confirm the cause of the uptick. Experts warn the circumstances during the storm were conducive to the development of a massive “superspreader” event.

“There are very real possibilities that the coronavirus either had superspreader events or was more easily transmissible because people were congregated indoors for long periods of time,” Dr. Katelyn Jetelina, an epidemiologist at UTHealth School of Public Health in Dallas, told the *New York Times*. “It is a little bit worrying.”

Without a way of keeping warm in their homes amid subfreezing temperatures, families were forced to temporarily stay with friends and family. The homeless had to choose between weathering the storm outdoors or staying in overcrowded warming shelters. Reports from multiple cities indicate thousands of people sought shelter during the cold.

The *Texas Tribune* reported nearly 200 people took refuge at a convention center in Fort Worth. In Dallas, another convention center held about 650 people. Approximately 500 people were staying in emergency shelters in Austin, while one warming center in Houston housed almost 800 people.

At the peak of the state's water crisis, more than 14 million Texas did not have access to water. This means millions could not practice basic hygiene, something

crucial in the middle of a pandemic. In fact, Texas' water issues are ongoing. As of Monday, about 390,000 Texans are still under boil water advisories. Even in large cities like Houston, residents are entering their second week without water.

“Even though the power is on and the water pressure is normalized, there are thousands of homes and apartments that have been affected because of busted pipes,” Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner reported in a press release Sunday. “They still do not have water, so there is a tremendous need.”

Texas has yet to calculate the full impact of the storm, but experts note Texas' infrastructure failure created conditions ideal for a rise in infections.

“It is possible to see an uptick from the Texas storm,” Jetelina said. “We had a lot of things going against us.”

She also noted that the lag in data reporting makes it difficult to calculate the storm's effect on COVID-19 cases, and researchers may not know for at least another week. Even then, it will be hard to tell whether the storm or the presence of a more contagious variant is responsible for any increase.

Researchers from Houston Methodist confirmed three additional COVID-19 variants of concern—originating from New York, California and Brazil—have been spreading in Houston for at least six to eight weeks. In total, five variants are circulating through the Houston area, the fifth largest metro region in the US with more than 7 million residents.

Harris County, where Houston is located, leads Texas in reported infections and fatalities, with more than 350,000 cases and 5,000 deaths since last March. The variants have the potential to be more infections or cause more serious illness.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the New York COVID-19 strain

carries a mutation that could possibly weaken some effectiveness of the vaccines which have so far been developed. Experts also worry that the discovery exposes how little is known about the virus and its variants.

Researchers in Houston's Medical Center have sequenced more than 20,000 viral genomes, more than any other state. Houston Methodist is one of the only medical entities in the US with the resources to actively identify and track the variants, using patient and sequencing data.

"We've got several variants in play," Dr. Peter Hotez told the *Houston Chronicle*. "We call them variants of concern. We're worried about higher transmissibility and more severity of illness. The ones that fit that category include the UK variant, the South Africa variant and the Brazil one."

"There's the question of the new variants coming out of California and New York," Hotez added. "We know they are rising in frequency."

"Even though we have a good plan to vaccinate American people by late summer or fall, the worry is that now that these variants have accelerated and the numbers start going up. What do we [do] until the mother lode of vaccines in June and July? How [do] we navigate this through the months of March, April and May? This is the time I'm really worried about," he said.



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