Data analysis estimates 700 deaths in Texas from Winter Storm Uri

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A data analysis performed by BuzzFeed News estimates there were 702 deaths from Winter Storm Uri in Texas in February, nearly five times higher than the state's official death toll of 151.

The analysis, reviewed by three independent experts, estimates between 426 and 978 died, using the mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which tracked the number of excess deaths after the storm in order to establish the number killed by the storm and ensuing blackout catastrophe. The lowest estimate is nearly three times the state's current numbers. The death spike was not recorded in surrounding states which did not have widespread and prolonged power outages.

The outages affected 69 percent of Texans during the week of the storm with the average length of time without power being 42 hours according to a University of Houston study, with some people losing power for up to five days. According to the same study, 4.5 million homes and businesses were without power at the peak of the blackout, with the economic toll expected to be as high as $295 billion.

Half of Texans lost access to water during the same period with the average time without potable water being 40 hours. Three-quarters of people had difficulty obtaining groceries, with 71 percent not being able to access internet service, and 63 percent even lacking access to bottled water.

The study found that 75 percent disapprove and 65 percent strongly disapprove of the misnamed Electric Reliability Council of Texas' handling of the blackout according to the study, with half disapproving of Republican Governor Gregg Abbott's performance during the storm. Over two-thirds agreed that "due to climate change Texas is more likely to be adversely affected by severe weather than 30 years ago."

The man-made disaster, for which the state and the electric industry bear responsibility, exposes the irrationality of the private ownership of energy production and the capitalist politicians who defend the right to profit.

One of the victims uncounted by the state was Julius Gonzales, 80, a retired maintenance worker. Gonzales was on dialysis and, following the loss of power at the clinic that provided his dialysis, he was forced to endure freezing temperatures in his trailer home in the low 20s Fahrenheit where he passed away. Gonzales weighed 114 pounds after suffering from COVID-19. His official death certificate merely states cardiovascular disease as the cause of death, while his wife Mary believes otherwise, telling BuzzFeed News, "I still believe the cold made him to where his heart just gave out."

Another victim, Gerald Herring, 70, an Army veteran living in Sugar Land who had undergone surgery for a torn heart valve a few years ago, became unresponsive and died not long after losing power. His house was cold and lacked power and had burst pipes. His death was listed as a natural death attributed to cardiovascular disease caused by high blood pressure and narrowed arteries. His sons believe the cold was the ultimate catalyst for his death, stating it "wouldn't have happened that day" had the power not been out.

The Fort Bend County Chief Medical Examiner Stephen Pustilnik stated to BuzzFeed News that "none of the history that [BuzzFeed] gathered was ever told to our investigators," claiming that they had asked the families but were not told, but not denying that the cause of death could be storm-related.

The count by the Texas Department of State Health Services largely relies on records from officials in individual counties, with most of the reported deaths being from hypothermia and few deaths being recorded among people with existing medical problems.

According to CDC data from the period, a sudden uptick of more than 200 deaths was recorded in the week ending February 20 attributed to diabetes and "diseases of the heart," which includes heart failure, arrhythmia and heart attacks. Additionally, more than 175 deaths from the same period have yet to be assigned a cause.

Fourteen counties out of the 254 in Texas have medical examiners to investigate untimely deaths, with the rest relying on justices of the peace with some training but rarely a medical background.

BuzzFeed News noted that after contacting the Galveston County medical examiner's office with a list of deaths it received an update on cause of deaths for two people, changing them from heart failure to "environmental exposure due to Feb 2021 winter storm." This was after the office was contacted by a reporter from *Texas Monthly* who was investigating deaths in Galveston when the storm and outages happened, with the

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medical examiner finding that enough data existed from the reporter to change the cause of death for the two cases.

The two people were 89-year-old Eula Piangenti, who lost oxygen after a power outage and was initially listed as dying from heart failure, and 68-year-old Shirley Napier, whose house was without power and had to have her heart restarted by EMT. Napier was admitted to the hospital with a body temperature below the threshold for hypothermia and later died in the hospital.

Dwight Walker, 67, was recorded as dying from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, a day after moving out of his freezing home to his sister's house. No record of Walker having been living in the cold without power was shared with the Dallas County medical examiner.

The medical examiner in Galveston County was not surprised that many deaths were not recorded by the state's official count, telling BuzzFeed News, "Did we capture all of them? Probably not."

Some patients who received regular dialysis ended up in the emergency room (ER) after dialysis clinics shut down, with the assistant chief of Houston Fire Department, who is responsible for emergency medical services, explaining, "They're calling 911 to get dropped off at an ER." Darrell Pile, CEO of the Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council which helps coordinate trauma and disaster response, stated that during the storm, "The calls kept coming in, but ambulances were tied up." Many were unable to make it to the ER as a result of roads that were not de-iced and from the disruption of the water supply to many hospitals.

Hannah Jarvis, an assistant medical examiner at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, noted that "Hypothermia is notoriously difficult to diagnose," stating that unless core body temperature is recorded while the patient is still alive it is very difficult to confirm as the cause of death.

WebMD notes that mild hypothermia can develop in elderly frail adults "in a 60-degree house after a power outage" and that complications during recovery can include, among other things, "heart arrhythmias, ventricular fibrillation… cardiac arrest… and death."

There is also the concern of secondary deaths occurring after the storm. One study, referenced in the S Navy Environmental Health Center technical manual *Prevention and Treatment of Heat and Cold Stress Injuries*, referencing a study of 91 elderly patients in Glasgow with hypothermia, states that, "In a series of hypothermia victims aged over 65 years, of those who survived the index admission, the 3-year mortality was 100% in those with primary [environmental] hypothermia," raising the possibility of even more deaths among the elderly after the storm.

The American Heart Association (AHA) notes that according to a 2015 study "death rates from circulatory problems, coronary heart disease and heart attacks all rose as temperatures fell." It noted that every 1-degree Celsius drop in temperature (1.8 degrees F) "came with a 0.49% increase in deaths from all causes." The AHA stated that other studies pointed to an increase in strokes when temperatures decrease.

Joan Casey, an environmental epidemiologist at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, told BuzzFeed News, "We have a huge body of epidemiologic literature that shows cold temperatures are associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, hospitalizations, and mortality."

A 2018 study, "Health Impacts of Citywide and Localized Power Outages in New York City," noted that "Localized, cold-weather outages were associated with all-cause mortality" and "cardiovascular disease hospitalizations," concluding that power outages may affect health and that it "underscores the public health importance of ensuring electric grid resiliency to climate change."

Michael Webber, a professor of mechanical engineering focused on energy infrastructure at the University of Texas at Austin, referring to the proposals made by lawmakers ostensibly aimed at fixing the inadequacies that led to the week-long blackout, remarked to BuzzFeed News that "as it stands, nothing has happened."

The problems with the grid are not confined only to winter vulnerability, with the "2021 Summer Reliability Assessment," released in May by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC), putting many US grids including ERCOT on the list of grids at "elevated risk" of energy emergency during the summer, with California specifically being put at "high risk."

No systematic effort by the state of Texas to date has been made to follow up on all those affected by the storm for the purpose of assigning the correct cause of death, let alone in order to account for potential secondary injuries and deaths resulting from the storm or for the welfare of those who may not know they are at increased risk of complications following the storm.

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