

3 children die of carbon monoxide poisoning in Michigan after massive power outage

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Three children died of carbon monoxide poisoning in metro Detroit over the holiday weekend, as families struggled to cope with a massive power outage, which left 400,000 households without lights, air conditioning, refrigeration and other necessities after a storm Friday evening.

All three were killed after their families, left in the dark for days, ran gasoline-powered generators to restore electricity, generators that filled enclosed spaces with lethal carbon monoxide.

The deaths of these children were the consequence of deliberate policies that allow hundreds of thousands of people across metro Detroit to lose power during routine summer storms due to chronic under-investment in vital infrastructure.

Approximately 29,400 DTE (Detroit Edison) customers, representing about 1.3 percent of the company's 2.27 million customer accounts, remain without electricity. Because each account typically represents an entire household, the actual number of people still sitting in the heat without power is substantially higher.

In Sumpter Township, southwest of the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport, two girls, ages 8 and 12, were found unresponsive inside their family's garage on Executive Drive on the morning of July 4. Police and firefighters arrived at approximately 10:20 a.m. Both children died despite efforts to revive them. Authorities believe they succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning from a portable gasoline-powered generator operating inside the enclosed garage—the family's improvised response to a prolonged power outage.

As of this writing, authorities have not publicly released the identities of the two girls. That same day, a 16-year-old Yemeni youth in the Downriver Detroit community of Melvindale also died from carbon monoxide poisoning from a generator operating in the basement of his family's home.

The immediate cause of the outage was a severe storm system. Thunderstorms with wind gusts exceeding 60 miles per hour swept across southeast Michigan over the holiday

weekend, downing trees and power lines and knocking out electricity to more half a million utility customers statewide. At its peak, this including 120,000 customers of Consumers Energy. At its peak, nearly 400,000 DTE Energy customers lost service. DTE restored power to more than 325,000 customers within 48 hours, a figure the company has prominently publicized.

For working class families living paycheck to paycheck, the refrigerator and freezer represent weeks of careful financial planning. Families purchase meat and other expensive food when it is on sale and freeze it because it is the only way to stretch budgets gutted by inflation, rising utility costs and stagnant wages. Several days without power during a Michigan summer can destroy all of it.

The power outages have hit seniors, including those reliant on medical devices, particularly hard. Local 4 reported that many seniors had not heard a thing from DTE for days, despite the utility's claims it was prioritizing seniors, low-income and other vulnerable customers. The local news outlet said residents at the three-story Parkside Senior Apartments in Livonia has lost elevator service, leaving residents on the upper floors stranded.

A young educator living in Detroit and caring for his aging mother explained how they survived the heat wave and outage:

Because my mother relies on oxygen, the power outage forced us to leave our home and stay in a hotel during the heat wave. Her insurance helped cover the cost, and we were able to use some discounts and split the remaining expenses, but many families do not have that option. The outage exposed the broader crisis of aging infrastructure and climate change, where a relatively short storm can leave working class communities without electricity, air conditioning, refrigeration or the medical equipment people depend on to survive.

DTE's electrical grid relies heavily on above-ground power lines that remain vulnerable to wind and ice storms. While the company has sought repeated rate increases from state regulators, residents continue to experience widespread outages when severe weather strikes.

In 1993, seven children died in a Detroit house fire after the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department shut off the family's water over a \$225 bill. Similar tragedies followed, including the deaths of three children in Sylvia Young's Detroit home after DTE cut off heat and a 2009 Detroit family killed by carbon monoxide poisoning after using a generator following a power shutoff. The circumstances vary, but the pattern is the same: When electricity is treated as a commodity rather than a necessity, working class families are forced into dangerous choices.

Henrietta, a retired Detroit Medical Center (DMC) worker, spoke with the WSWS in the days following the outage, capturing the mood of the community:

We're watching a real-life nightmare. The elites, the government agencies and the companies that are supposed to protect us are instead harming us and keeping people trapped in these conditions. I'm sure many of those without power were close to suffering heat stroke. They had sleepless nights. Their food spoiled and had to be thrown away. Their bodies were already under stress, and this just made everything worse.

It's a dire situation. People need electricity to survive. Some rely on ventilators or oxygen. Others need refrigeration to store food or medication. Without electricity, people who depend on oxygen can't even breathe.

They're taking our money while they're taking away our ability to live. People see DTE as a monopoly. They think it's dishonest. They believe everyone is taking care of each other except the people who need help the most. DTE keeps getting richer, they keep raising people's rates, but the service is so poor that people are dying.

When asked how a single storm in the 21st century can leave tens of thousands without power for days, she responded: "That's what happens when you allow the authorities to take control of everything. They take care of greed instead of people's needs."

Indicting both parties she said:

Your politicians, your leaders, your Republican Party and your Democratic Party don't care about our lives. The whole infrastructure is collapsing, but they always have money for downtown—for Ilitch and Gilbert. They have money for the real elites who run things. The people who really run the city, the state and the government aren't the ones. They're just puppets on a string who do whatever they're told. They can always afford war, but they can't afford to feed poor people. Something is wrong with that. The whole game is to keep us divided, distracted and fighting each other when we should be looking at the real culprits.

For many Detroit residents, the emergency manager system, the consent agreement, the Financial Review Commission and the city's bankruptcy restructuring in 2013-14 represented not a solution to the decades of deindustrialization, austerity and poverty but another mechanism through which decisions were removed from public control while wealth continued to flow upward.

DTE remains one of the most powerful corporate institutions shaping decisions affecting residents. David Bing, who paved the way for the bankruptcy, served on DTE's board of directors before his years as mayor between 2009 and 2014. After leaving office, a federal bankruptcy judge privatized Detroit's 120-year-old Public Lighting Department, handing over the city's streetlights to DTE.

The deaths in Metro Detroit occurred amid official claims of a Detroit revival. The "Detroit renaissance" narrative is built around luxury developments, downtown projects, stadiums and corporate investment. It does not reflect the material conditions of working class neighborhoods throughout the city and surrounding communities.

Poverty, inflation and deteriorating public infrastructure continue to shape daily life for millions of workers. Food prices remain high, utility costs have increased, and many families have little or no financial cushion when disaster strikes. A storm that should be a temporary inconvenience becomes a life-threatening event when families lack the resources to protect themselves.



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