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Analysis reveals nearly 200 died in Texas cold storm and blackouts, almost double the official count

Zach Despart, Alejandro Serrano, Stephanie Lamm, Staff writers

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Janice Carter poses for a portrait holding a photo of her late sister, Deborah Kiel, on her back porch Wednesday, March 31, 2021 in Houston. Kiel died after losing power during the February winter storm.

Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

The deaths of nearly 200 people are linked to February's cold snap and blackouts, a Houston Chronicle analysis reveals, making the natural disaster one of the worst in Texas this past century.

The tally, which is nearly double the state's official count, comes from an investigation of reports from medical examiners, justices of the peace and Department of State Health Services, as well as lawsuits and news stories.

The state count, which is preliminary, has yet to incorporate some deaths already flagged by medical examiners as storm-related.

least 16 carbon monoxide poisonings of residents who used dangerous methods for heat and at least 22 Texans who died when medical devices failed without power or who were unable to seek live-saving care because of the weather.

Sixteen deaths were from other causes, such as fires or vehicle wrecks, while the remaining 40 were attributed by authorities to the storm without listing a specific cause.

“This is almost double the death toll from Hurricane Harvey,” said State Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas. “There was no live footage of flooded homes, or roofs being blown off, or tidal surges, but this was more deadly and devastating than anything we’ve experienced in modern state history.”

The toll is almost certain to grow in coming weeks as death investigators in the state’s most populous counties clear a backlog in cases from the cold snap. The Travis County medical examiner alone is investigating more than 80 deaths between Feb. 13 and Feb. 20.



has been out since yesterday.

Jon Shapley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

The deaths come from 57 counties in all regions of the state but are disproportionately centered on the Houston area, which at times during the crisis accounted for nearly half of all power outages. Of the known ages, races and ethnicities of the victims, 74 percent were people of color. Half were at least 65. Six were children.

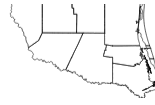
Those deaths could have been avoided, disaster and medical experts say, if Texas leaders had ensured the state's energy infrastructure could withstand severe winter weather, had informed the public that sustained blackouts were possible, or had a comprehensive plan to protect vulnerable residents during extreme cold events.

"I had a 93-year-old who died in his home. If his electricity had not been turned off in those rolling blackouts, chances are he'd be alive today," said Dr. Corinne Stern, the Webb County medical examiner. "These deaths were preventable, and they're senseless. They shouldn't have happened."

Deaths caused by winter storm Uri

As of April 1, state and county officials determined the winter storm was a factor in nearly 200 deaths in Texas. The most common cause of death was hypothermia or exposure, which claimed 102 lives.

Houston Chronicle reporters contacted officials in every county to provide the most comprehensive tally of deaths related to the winter storm from Feb.13-17, 2021.



Source: DSHS, Houston Chronicle reporting

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The week of Valentine’s Day, temperatures plunged below freezing across the state. Energy infrastructure froze and dropped offline, forcing the state’s main power grid, ERCOT, to order widespread blackouts to avoid a catastrophic system failure. At the peak of the crisis, more than 4 million Texas customers were in the dark. Many had no power or heat for days, unable to travel due to unsafe roads or because they had nowhere else to go.

Days-long blackouts are “unheard of” in developed countries, said José Aguilar, a U.S.-based utilities expert working to repair Venezuela’s power grid after mismanagement and underinvestment led to an electricity crisis two year ago. All grids have flaws, he said, but Texas leaders failed to heed warnings from past outages to make the state’s system more resilient.

“It’s inexcusable, the consequences the poor folks had to suffer,” Aguilar said. “If people in Texas aren’t going to pay attention to this, they’re going to put in Texas

answer any questions until its probe is complete.

News reports and dozens of wrongful death lawsuits brought against power companies by relatives of Texans who perished help fill in the gaps.

What the death tally to date shows is how Texans were caught off guard – in the days before the blackouts, ERCOT issued no warnings that widespread outages could occur – and that most victims were vulnerable in some way.

Betty Dietker, 74, died of suspected hypothermia after the temperature inside her Hunt County home dropped to 32 degrees. Manuel Riojas, 64, who had 23 grandchildren, died at his San Antonio home after his oxygen machine lost power.

Deborah Wright, 63; James Harkness Jr., 60; and Richard Woodard, 42, succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning from a generator in Nacogdoches County. Rodrick

Michelle DeFord, 52, bundles up in a blanket to stay warm outside the warming shelter at the George R. Brown Convention Center, where she is staying during the frigid cold weather Tuesday, Feb. 16, 2021 in Houston. Temperatures stayed below freezing Tuesday, with many still without power.

Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

As the cold weather immobilized everyone across the state, Gloria Jones assured everyone who checked in on her: She was fine.

The 87-year-old, who lived alone in Hillsboro, roughly 60 miles southwest of Dallas, had remained healthy and social until then, making video calls over the last year to

For a 50-year-old man, Daniel said, he was doing great.

Deborah Kiel collapsed shortly after her sister arrived to pick her up from her Houston home, which had no power, on Feb. 15.

Paramedics arrived and “tried and tried” to resuscitate Kiel, said her sister Janice Carter, who attempted CPR before they showed up. They took her to a hospital, where she was pronounced dead.

Discrepancies in the number of storm deaths reported by medical examiners to the Chronicle and by DSHS for those same counties raise questions about how strict the state's criteria are.

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