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## Blackouts Are a Growing Reality for Americans (Revisited) - Inside Climate News

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7-8 minutes



*Overhead electric power lines photographed in Redondo Beach, California on Tuesday, July 13, 2021. Credit: Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images*

Much of the United States will face higher chances of power outages this summer, as soaring heat combined with skyhigh energy prices strains the nation's electricity grids, the regulatory authority overseeing the country's energy infrastructure said in its latest assessment. It's yet another warning in recent years that climate change is making it harder for the nation's aging power grids to reliably provide electricity amid increasing storms, heat waves, wildfires and even drought.

In fact, the [North American Electric Reliability Corporation's report](#) points to droughts as one of the main factors likely to drive energy shortfalls this summer. Hydroelectric dams are struggling to generate electricity because of record low water levels in the

Colorado River Basin. Fossil fuel-fired power plants also use that water to cool their equipment.

The report comes just a week after utilities and governments in the Midwest, Texas and California [issued similar warnings](#), worried that surging use of air conditioning during a summer that is predicted to be hotter than average would strain their tight supply of fuels amid surging global prices for oil and natural gas. After Russia invaded Ukraine in late February and aggravated an already volatile global energy market, analysts have urged governments to diversify their energy supplies and hasten their transition to renewable power sources like solar and wind.

The problems aren't exclusive to summer. The U.S. has faced growing threats of power failures during the winter months in recent years, as well. And [news reports](#) this week warned that as many as six million households in the United Kingdom are facing similar risks during the coming winter.

But even before the Ukraine war, and the latest predictions of an unusually hot and dry summer, blackouts had become a growing reality for Americans. To get a better idea of what this all means, Today's Climate is revisiting an earlier newsletter that was originally published Feb. 1.

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One of the worst blizzards to hit the Northeast in four years left more than 96,000 homes and businesses without electricity over the weekend, as governors in five states from New York to Maine declared a state of emergency. In the South, Texans are preparing this week for another potentially devastating cold snap almost exactly a year after a winter storm triggered massive power outages that left hundreds of people dead. And in December, Colorado utilities implemented rolling blackouts after a bizarre winter wildfire terrorized Boulder County.

In every corner of the nation and during every season, blackouts are becoming more commonplace as climate change exacerbates extreme weather and tests America's aging power grids. Power failures have increased by 60 percent since 2015, [according to research published last year](#).

The outages are also lasting longer, specifically because of extreme weather. Between 2013 and 2020, blackouts caused by major events—such as snowstorms, wildfires and hurricanes—have tripled in duration, according to the [latest data from the U.S.](#)

[Energy Information Administration](#). In 2020, Americans experienced an average of 8 hours of power loss, with 6 of those hours tied to major weather events, compared to just 2 hours in 2013.

It's an increasingly deadly combination when the outages are paired with the extreme weather itself. In 2021, hundreds of deaths were attributed, at least in part, to a lack of power. The Texas storm last February was a prime example, where the combination of widespread power outages and freezing temperatures led to more than 200 deaths in the state. And in the summer of 2021, blackouts caused by Hurricane Ida contributed to at least 14 deaths in Louisiana as some of the poorest parts of the state sweltered for weeks in 90-degree heat without working air-conditioning.

"A widespread blackout during an intense heat wave may be the deadliest climate-related event we can imagine," Brian Stone Jr., a professor at the School of City & Regional Planning at Georgia Institute of Technology [told the New York Times](#).

Last year, Stone published a study finding that in Atlanta, Detroit and Phoenix, heat waves combined with power outages would expose at least two-thirds of residents in those cities to heat exhaustion or heat stroke. That threat is particularly pronounced for the lowest-income households, who are 20 percent less likely to have central air-conditioning than the highest-income households. And that's not to mention [the threat blackouts pose to those who rely on plug-in medical devices](#), such as ventilators, to live.

In fact, growing fears over losing power and decreasing faith in utilities has led to a boom in home generator sales, [NPR reported](#). One manufacturer, Generac Power Systems, had a nearly 50 percent jump in revenue last year with sales of close to \$3.7 billion. Places like the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, which was ravaged by major hurricanes in 2017, has seen a similar trend toward private generators after the storms resulted in nearly 3,000 deaths—many of them attributed to a lack of electricity.

Puerto Rico's daily blackouts have [sparked a heated debate](#) over what solution the government should pursue as it works to replace the island's still mangled electrical grid. Utilities have continued to push natural gas as the answer, saying the infrastructure can be "hardened" against climate-fueled disasters. But Puerto Ricans have overwhelmingly called on their government—and the Biden administration—to quickly transition the island to renewable energy, saying solar energy paired with battery storage and smaller grids

can better withstand future hurricanes.

It was a heated debate in Texas last winter, too, with many Republican lawmakers [falsely blaming renewable energy](#) for the state's catastrophic blackouts. As the state prepares for another potentially consequential cold snap this week, and as New England recovers from yet another major storm, and as the Biden administration prepares to roll out more than \$1 trillion in infrastructure funding, you can expect that debate to rekindle as hot as ever.

Thanks for reading Today's Climate and I'll be back in your inbox Friday.

### **Today's Indicator**

4 percent

That's how much U.S. carbon dioxide emissions rose during the first three months of 2022 compared to the same period last year, driven by a record-high number of motorists on the road, [according to an analysis of government data](#).