

U.S. NEWS

Texas disaster: Polar vortex plunges Lone Star state into wintry nightmare without power, water and answers

By **LARRY MCSHANE**
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death toll of at least two dozen.

At the nadir of the deep freeze that began last Sunday, 4 million Texans lost electricity as the statewide power grid teetered and nearly collapsed — dodging by seconds a nightmare scenario of widespread blackouts lasting for months. The state's water supply became compromised, with 7 million Texans still instructed Saturday to boil tap water before use.

Record-setting low temperatures accompanied the unprecedented lethal weather that coated the state with snow and ice, freezing up pipes and shutting down power plants. At one point, the Texas temperatures dipped to three degrees below the reading in Anchorage, Alaska.



FEEDBACK

Icicles hang off the State Highway 195 sign on February 18, 2021 in Killeen, Texas. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

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poisoning among those trying to get warm

Among the victims was an 11-year-old Honduran immigrant boy, Cristian Pavon, who died, likely of hypothermia, after playing in the snow and then returning to a Houston-area mobile home with no heat.

A Houston family died inside their garage, killed by carbon monoxide as they sat inside their idling car. A Texas woman and her three grandchildren perished in a fire possibly ignited by a fireplace they were using for heat. A lifeless Abilene man, 67, who was found on a downtown street. And a 60-year-old man just outside Abilene was found dead in bed inside his ice-cold home.

“A man FROZE TO DEATH under our collective noses. In Abilene!” wrote Josh Casey, president of the charity Abilene Fresh, in a Thursday Facebook post.



FEEDBACK

Cristian Pavon, an 11-year-old Texas boy who died of hypothermia. (GoFundMe)

In the midst of the madness, Dallas-Fort Worth area firefighters responded to call where

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even put Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) in a political deep freeze over the top of winter storms as Texans shivered from a massive electrical outage decades in the making.

Suburban Dallas resident Matt Varble of Las Colinas lost electricity twice last Monday, with the power outage lasting for more than three hours.

“I lived in the North for a long time and nothing like this ever happened when I lived in New York, Ohio or Illinois,” he told The Dallas Morning News. “It starts to feel very cold in my house.”



Sen. Ted Cruz, (R-Texas) walks to check in for his flight back to the U.S., at Cancun International Airport in Cancun, Mexico on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021. (Dan Christian Rojas/AP)

FEEDBACK

Typical February temperatures for Dallas run from an average of 41 to 61 degrees, but the arrival of a polar vortex from the North Pole turned things upside down in 2021. Experts believe the deep freeze was a result of both natural random climate and climate change caused by humans.

Snow first hit the Dallas area on Valentine's Day, closing the Love Field airport with

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East Austin, Texas, residents push a car out of the snow on Feb. 15, 2021. (Montinique Monroe/Getty Images)

The finger-pointing started quickly, with Gov. Greg Abbott ordering an investigation into the failure. Officials at the unfortunately-titled Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) defended their preparations and subsequent rolling blackouts last Monday as its power grid approached disaster.

“It’s almost like a murder suspect blaming their right hand for committing the crime,” said Democratic state Rep. James Talarico, whose Austin home lost electricity for 40 hours.

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott leaves a news conference after speaking about the winter storm at the State Operations Center, Thursday Feb. 18, 2021, in Austin, Texas. (Jay Janner/AP)

Robert McCullough, an expert on energy issues, said the Texas debacle was predictable given the state's decades of inaction in upgrading its electrical grid. The latest North American Electric Reliability Corporation summary identified Texas as the least prepared area in North America to face a harsh winter.

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“It’s pretty straightforward: They don’t have enough capacity, unlike everywhere else in North America,” said McCullough. “They’ve had 20 years of discussion about mandating the winterization of pipelines and power resources, and haven’t done anything.”

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Oncor apprentice lineman Brendan Waldon repairs a utility pole that was damaged by the winter storm that passed through Texas Thursday, Feb. 18, 2021, in Odessa, Texas. (Eli Hartman/AP)

He cited a 1990 report from the Public Utilities Commission of Texas citing the very problems encountered three decades later: A lack of reliable power, along with issues in plant operation and a number of other problems.

“When the person in charge says, ‘Oh, by the way, you need to winterize your pipes,’ you should actually do that,” said McCullough. “The word stupid comes to mind.”

FEEDBACK

Could the same sort of nightmare happen in New York?

It did on a much smaller scale in a different season just last summer, when New York and its suburban neighbors endured a lesser August nightmare as Tropical Storm Isaias tore through the area. Power was knocked out to 900,000 customers across the five

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“They don’t do nothing,” griped Lady Bisons, stuck without electricity in Ridgewood, Queens. “Con Ed doesn’t do nothing.”

Gov. Cuomo immediately announced utilities serving those regions faced potential penalties totaling more than \$137 million for their mishandling of the disaster. And on Friday, the governor advanced legislation to hold utilities responsible for failures to address power outages.

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People wait in line to fill up their containers with water at Meanwhile Brewing Company in Austin, Texas, on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021, during a citywide boil water notice caused by the winter storm. The brewery gave away all 4,000 gallons of their water to people in need on Thursday and Friday. (Jay Janner /Austin American-Statesman via AP) (Jay Janner/AP)

Down in Texas, the fallout from the unexpected blast of winter endured as relatives made plans for funerals.

Last Monday, a 75-year-old man died after leaving his house in Crosby, Texas, to grab an emergency oxygen tank from his truck after the power went out. Vietnam veteran Carroll Anderson walked into the 19-degree chill, and was found dead in his truck a day later.

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“He shouldn’t have had to die because he couldn’t breathe because we didn’t have power,” said Gloria Anderson, his weeping wife of three decades, to the Houston Chronicle.

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