

# Power failure: How a winter storm pushed Texas into crisis

February 21 2021, by Nomaan Merchant

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In this Feb. 16, 2021, file photo, a woman wrapped in a blanket crosses the street near downtown Dallas. As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' power grid collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. (AP Photo/LM Otero, File)

Two days before the storm began, Houston's chief elected official

warned her constituents to prepare as they would for a major hurricane. Many took heed: Texans who could stocked up on food and water, while nonprofits and government agencies set out to help those who couldn't.

But few foresaw the fiasco that was to come. They could not be prepared.

As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' [power grid](#) collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. And a prideful state, long suspicious of regulation and outside help, was left to seek aid from other states and humanitarian groups as many of its 29 million people grasped for survival.

Images of desperate Texans circulated worldwide. To some, they evoked comparisons to a less wealthy or self-regarding place. To others, they laid bare problems that have long festered.

A week after she warned her county's nearly 5 million residents about the impending storm, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo was sleeping on an air mattress at the county's emergency operations center. Her home had been without power for three nights.

"It's worth asking the question: Who set up this system and who perpetuated it knowing that the right regulation was not in place?" Hidalgo said.



In this Feb. 19, 2021, file photo, water is loaded into cars at a City of Houston water distribution site in Houston. The drive-thru stadium location was setup to provide bottled water to individuals who need water while the city remains on a boil water notice or because they lack water at home due to frozen or broken pipes. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip, File)

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Around 2 a.m. Monday, the full measure of the crisis Texas faced began to be apparent.

Cold and ice had set in the day before, leading to spreading [power outages](#) across the state. But standing in the emergency operations center early Monday, Hidalgo and others learned that their local energy

provider, CenterPoint Energy, would not be able to "roll" outages between homes as they had been told earlier.

Instead of short intervals of heat, enough to keep their homes safe, residents would have to go without for days on end.

Power outages spiraled through the day Monday, ultimately cutting off more than 4 million people. Grocery stores shut down and hotel rates skyrocketed.

People who fled to the homes of relatives or neighbors had to consider the risks of contracting or spreading coronavirus.

Ashley Archer and her husband decided to take in his best friend at their suburban Dallas home. She is pregnant and has been trying to protect herself from the virus for nearly a year.





In this Feb. 16, 2021, file photo, people wait in a long line to buy groceries at H-E-B in Austin, Texas, during an extreme cold snap and widespread power outage. As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' power grid collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. (Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman via AP)

The friend is "like family," she said. "We weren't going to let him freeze at his place."

Things got worse Tuesday. Thousands of people sought refuge from their freezing homes in warming shelters. Others sat in their cars; dozens were hospitalized for carbon monoxide poisoning. A woman and her daughter died after running their car inside a garage.

At her Dallas condominium, 51-year-old Stephanie Murdoch layered in blankets, two pairs of pants, two sweaters, three pairs of socks, a hat, and gloves. Her anger grew at the power companies and their apparent lack of preparation.

"We've got another blast of snow coming in this evening ... and still no clear answers as to why the grids aren't working better," she said.

By Wednesday, some started to get their power back, but a new shortage emerged—drinkable water.



In this Feb. 17, 2021, file photo, Juan Guerrlo, center left, waits in line to fill his propane tanks in Houston. Customers had to wait over an hour in the freezing rain to fill their tanks. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip, File)

Frozen pipes burst across the state. And the water that did come out of taps was often undrinkable due to dangerously low water pressure levels. At one point, an estimated 13 million people were under a boil-water order, nearly half of Texas' population.

More than 35 people in Texas have been confirmed dead. That number was expected to rise as roads cleared and relatives and first responders could check on missing loved ones.

Mark Henry, Galveston County's judge, asked the state early in the week to send a refrigerated truck requested by the local medical examiner, who expected an influx of bodies.

"If they had been honest with us from the beginning, we would have ordered evacuations. But they didn't tell us that," he said.

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The disaster can be traced to mistakes by Texas' leadership and faults created by decades of opposition to more regulations and preparation.





In this Feb. 19, 2021, file photo, Nancy Wilson boils water in her home in Houston. She does not have full running water as the city remains under a boil water notice and many residents lack water at home due to frozen or broken pipes. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip, File)

Basically, the state is an island in the U.S. electrical system.

There is one large grid covering the Eastern half of the country, another for the West, with Texas wedged between them. There is a long and colorful history to how this came to be, but the simplest explanation is that Texas utilities wanted to be free of federal regulation. They accomplished that, going back to the middle of the last century, by avoiding sending power across state lines.



The Texas grid isn't walled off, but there are only a few, small interconnection points with the Eastern U.S. grid and Mexico. In the past, utility executives have argued that the Texas grid would be less reliable and more vulnerable to blackouts if it were fully connected to the rest of the country – which would make it easier for other states to tap Texas during their own shortages.



In this Feb. 16, 2021, file photo, customers use the light from a cell phone to look in the meat section of a grocery store in Dallas. Even though the store lost power, it was open for cash only sales. (AP Photo/LM Otero, File)

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas, or ERCOT, was created in 1970; it became a more powerful broker over electricity flows after deregulation in this century. In the wake of the storm, it has taken most

of the blame from Texas politicians and the public.

Despite efforts by some Republicans to blame clean energy, the failures occurred in every part of the sector. While [wind turbines](#) and solar panels froze, a major nuclear plant lost half of its generation, and there were massive failures in coal, oil, and natural gas. Demand surged, meanwhile, as people accustomed to mild Texas winters turned on their heat.

In 2011, millions of Texans lost power during the Super Bowl, which was played in a Dallas suburb. Two agencies, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the North American Electric Reliability Corporation, conducted a study on how Texas could "winterize" its energy infrastructure. At the highest end, winterizing 50,000 gas wells would cost an estimated \$1.75 billion, the study found.



In this Feb. 16, 2021, file photo, Robert Webster pulls a full canister of propane for sale as customers line up to enter a grocery store in Dallas. As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' power grid collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. (AP Photo/LM Otero, File)

Of the 2011 storm, the report said generators and natural gas producers said they had "winterization procedures in place. However, the [poor performance](#) of many of these generating units and wells suggests that these procedures were either inadequate or were not adequately followed."

But there was no broad move to winterize equipment. Since then, bills requiring energy producers to hold more power in reserve or ordering a study of how to better prepare for winter failed in the Republican-controlled Texas House.

Texas lawmakers deregulated the energy market in 2002. Supporters say this lowered energy prices statewide, but critics say it gave producers leeway to avoid improvements that might have prevented events like this week's catastrophe.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has promised multiple investigations of this storm and made ERCOT an "emergency" item for the legislature, which is currently in its biennial session.





In this Feb. 15, 2021, file photo, Dan Bryant and his wife Anna huddle by the fire with sons Benny, 3, and Sam, 12 weeks, along with their dog Joey, also wearing two doggie sweaters, with power out and temperatures dropping inside their home after a winter storm brought snow and freezing temperatures to North Texas in Garland, Texas. (Smiley N. Pool/The Dallas Morning News via AP, File)



In this Feb. 15, 2021, file photo, traffic is sparse on the snow-covered Interstate 45 near The Woodlands Parkway following an overnight snowfall in The Woodlands, Texas. Temperatures plunged into the teens Monday with light snow and freezing rain. (Brett Coomer/Houston Chronicle via AP, File)



In this Feb. 16, 2021, file photo, a man seeking shelter from sup-freezing temperatures prepares his cot at a make-shift warming shelter at Travis Park Methodist Church in San Antonio. As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' power grid collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. (AP Photo/Eric Gay, File)





In this Feb. 17, 2021, file photo, LaDonna collects from a trash container ice cream that had been thrown out because of power outages at a Kroger store in Arlington, Texas. LaDonna said she's collecting the frozen goods for her neighbors. "I do it because they would do it for me.", she said. Rolling power outages this week have forced businesses to clear merchandise that needs refrigeration. The power was back Wednesday and the store was open. (Tom Fox/The Dallas Morning News via AP, File)



In this Feb. 18, 2021, file photo, a woman living on the streets uses blankets to keep warm in downtown San Antonio. Snow, ice and sub-freezing weather continue to wreak havoc on the state's power grid and utilities. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)





In this Feb. 18, 2021, file photo, demonstrators stand in front of U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz's home demanding his resignation in Houston. Cruz has acknowledged that his family vacation to Mexico was "obviously a mistake" as he returned stateside following an uproar over his disappearance during a deadly winter storm. (Marie D. De Jesús/Houston Chronicle via AP, File)





In this Feb. 14, 2021, file photo, woman walks through falling snow in San Antonio. As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' power grid collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. (AP Photo/Eric Gay, File)

"I think there is going to have to be a serious inquiry into why it was, what were the factors that led the grid not to be able to meet the energy needs of Texas," said Republican U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz.

Cruz spoke Thursday evening in the yard of his home in Houston's wealthiest neighborhood, River Oaks. He had cut short a trip to Cancun, Mexico, after images circulated of him waiting at a Houston airport for his flight to the resort town.

At week's end, as the cold weather began to loosen its grip, the power grid came back online for most Texans. But burst pipes had flooded thousands of homes. Earlier in the week, Abbott had asked plumbers from other states to come to Texas and help.

But fixing pipes is one thing. Fixing a whole state is another.

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