

U.S. NEWS

Tallying Texas Deaths Could Take Months

Experts warn accurate count of fatalities from poisoning, hypothermia may never be known

By ELIZABETH FINDELL

The harsh winter storm that hit Texas and other states last week has been blamed for dozens of deaths, though officials said that it would be weeks or months before the human cost of the freezing weather and utility crisis is known and that it might never be fully accurate.

The failure of the state's electrical grid during the week-long cold snap left more than four million Texans without electricity and heat, many for days on end in subfreezing temperatures. Many residents also lost access to water, and 14.6 million were ordered to boil water to make it safe to drink. Power had been restored in most of the state by Tuesday morning, but 7.5 million people in 204 counties remained under boil-water orders.

So far, nearly 80 people have died a result of the storm and its effects, according to

the Associated Press.

An 11-year-old boy was found frozen in his bed, his family told the Houston Chronicle. A grandmother and three grandchildren died in a house fire as they were trying to stay warm, the Chronicle also reported. At least six deaths occurred near the Abilene area, local media reported, including a patient who couldn't get medical treatment due to a lack of water and three elderly men who were found dead in subfreezing homes.

Harris County, which includes Houston, has confirmed at least 15 hypothermia deaths and one fatal fall on ice, according to its forensics institute. Several others died from carbon-monoxide poisoning after taking unsafe measures to stay warm, according to the county's top executive. In Travis County, which includes Austin, the medical examiner's office is busy processing more than 80 cases from last week to determine causes of death, an official said.

Medical examiners don't determine the circumstances of a death. It will be up to officials such as constables and justices of the peace in each of



Ricki Mills, right, handed her daughter a cooking pan as residents of a Dallas apartment complex waited for a fire hydrant to be opened.

Texas' 254 counties to investigate any recent deaths and decide whether they might have been related to the storm. Cases that local registrars flag as possibly storm-related will be referred to state epidemiologists to evaluate, said Chris Van Deusen, a spokesman for the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Calculating fatalities from any large-scale crisis is difficult, and totals can be unreliable, said Robert Jensen, chairman of Kenyon International Emergency Services, a London- and Houston-based

firm that has been hired to help count deaths after events such as Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana in 2005. Authorities there primarily counted bodies left behind as floodwater receded, he said. In a case such as the storm in Texas, the reporting is likely to be based on local authorities' opinions.

"Every county will kind of do their own thing," Mr. Jensen said. Individual officials will have to weigh factors such as whether a house fire or a carbon-monoxide poisoning occurred because people were trying to stay warm, whether

a car crash happened because of ice, or whether a lack of water or power caused an existing medical condition to flare or go untreated.

Mr. Jensen added that there is often little political will among state officials to standardize the process or to determine the true cost of a disaster.

"Mass fatalities scare people, and they're very political," he said.

Some lawsuits against the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which manages the Texas energy grid, are seeking to link specific deaths to the

storm. An attorney for Doyle Austin, a Houstonian whose family found him unresponsive—a week shy of his 96th birthday—after two days without power and temperatures down to 11 degrees, said he died of hypothermia.

An Ercot spokeswoman said it hadn't yet reviewed the lawsuits, but said it was confident blackouts were the right decision to avoid a prolonged statewide blackout. "This is a tragedy," she said. "Our thoughts are with all Texans who have and are suffering due to this past week."