



# La Fe Policy Research and Education Center



*Promoviendo Bienestar para Familias y Comunidad con Conocimiento, Confianza y Poder  
Promoting Family and Community Well-Being through Knowledge, Trust, and Empowerment*

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## Texas' Climate Disasters: Latino Community Impact and Policy Assessment

The Texas Winter Storm, in February 2021, disproportionately impacted Latino, Black, and low-income peoples.<sup>1</sup> The winter disaster occurred while they were struggling with pandemic conditions and its concurrent disproportionate economic and health effects.<sup>2</sup> Notably, Latino concerns about climate change and its effect on them are higher than most other population groups.<sup>3</sup>

Latinos are painfully aware of their vulnerability to climate disasters from the combination of inadequate policies, preventive measures, and weak assistance responses. Environmental issues encompassing pollution, flooding, and energy failures have and continue to negatively impact them.

**“Across the state, poor, brown, and black communities, who have less access to resources, will bear the greatest brunt when it comes to climate change.”<sup>4</sup>**

Latino environmental advocates in Houston, San Antonio, Rio Grande Valley, and El Paso exemplify climate, environmental experiences, and related social justice concerns. Their efforts target preventive measures and equity in disaster assistance from weather-related events and industries generating harmful pollutants.<sup>5</sup> The winter storm revealed a pattern of Texas policy failures and their harmful health and economic effects on people of color and low-income populations.

### Texas Winter Storm Impact and Response Issues

The storm left approximately 4.5 million homes and businesses without power at its most devastating peak. The economic loss to the state's gross product is estimated as high as \$128.7 billion, and up to \$85.1 billion in lost income.<sup>6</sup>

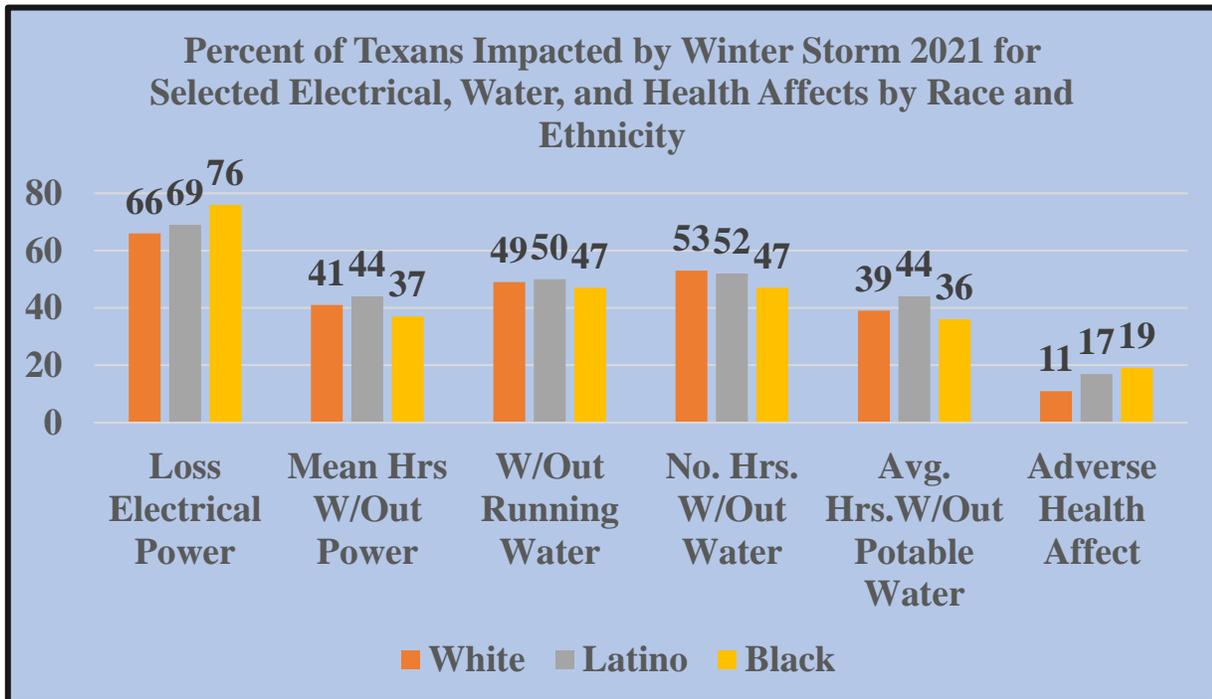
According to the Texas Department of State Health Services final report, there were 246 confirmed winter storm deaths. The deaths included 132 White Non-Latinos, 53 Latinos, 48 Blacks, 13 other people of color, and 1 unknown.<sup>7</sup> However, these figures are refuted by a BuzzFeed News well-recognized data analysis method that estimates over 700 deaths.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the analysis points to medically vulnerable victims with chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular, and kidney problems, diseases that are particularly salient in Latino and Black communities.

Legislative and other electrical grid responsible officials neglected to prevent the power grid's collapse regardless of repeated warnings of its vulnerability. They also failed to effectively respond to the scale of the crisis that followed. While reports identified multiple causes for the power grid's collapse, “the inability of power plants to perform in the extreme cold was the No. 1 cause of the outages last year.”<sup>9</sup>

A survey of Texas residents age 18 and older living in the 213 counties (91.5 of the state population) served by the Texas Electrical Grid noted the following:<sup>10</sup>

- 78% did not believe that the power outages in their area were carried out equitably, and 81% thought they would have benefited from more timely and accurate information before, during, and after the winter storm.
- 69% who lost electrical power between February 14<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, for an average of 42 hours - were without power on average for one single consecutive block of 31 hours, rather than for short rotating periods.
- 49% lost access to running water and were without water for an average of 52 hours.
- Those with running water could not drink it for an average of 40 hours.
- Other negative effects included difficulty obtaining food or groceries (75%), the loss of Internet service (71%), and difficulty obtaining bottled water (63%).
- 31% reported that they suffered water damage, and fewer than one in five believed that their insurance was either likely or somewhat likely to cover the full cost of the damages.
- When they lost electrical power and heat, 18% opted to leave their home. The most common destination (44%) was a local relative’s home.
- Of those who remained in their home without power, 26% used their gas oven or cooktop as a source of heat and were desperate to avoid hypothermia, 8% used a grill or smoker indoors, and 5% used an outdoor propane heater indoors.

Blacks and Latinos experience slightly higher effects from the storm, with the larger gap occurring in adverse health effects.



Texas’ lack of preparedness should not be a surprise, ‘prevention’ is hardly the state’s strong cost-effective policy suit. Public health, child abuse, health care access, public education, worker safety, and the environment have all experienced the state’s slow and inadequate policy actions. Related

documented examples that resulted in avoidable and harmful effects include Covid-19, foster care, Medicaid Expansion, mental health, and insufficient and inequitable education funding.

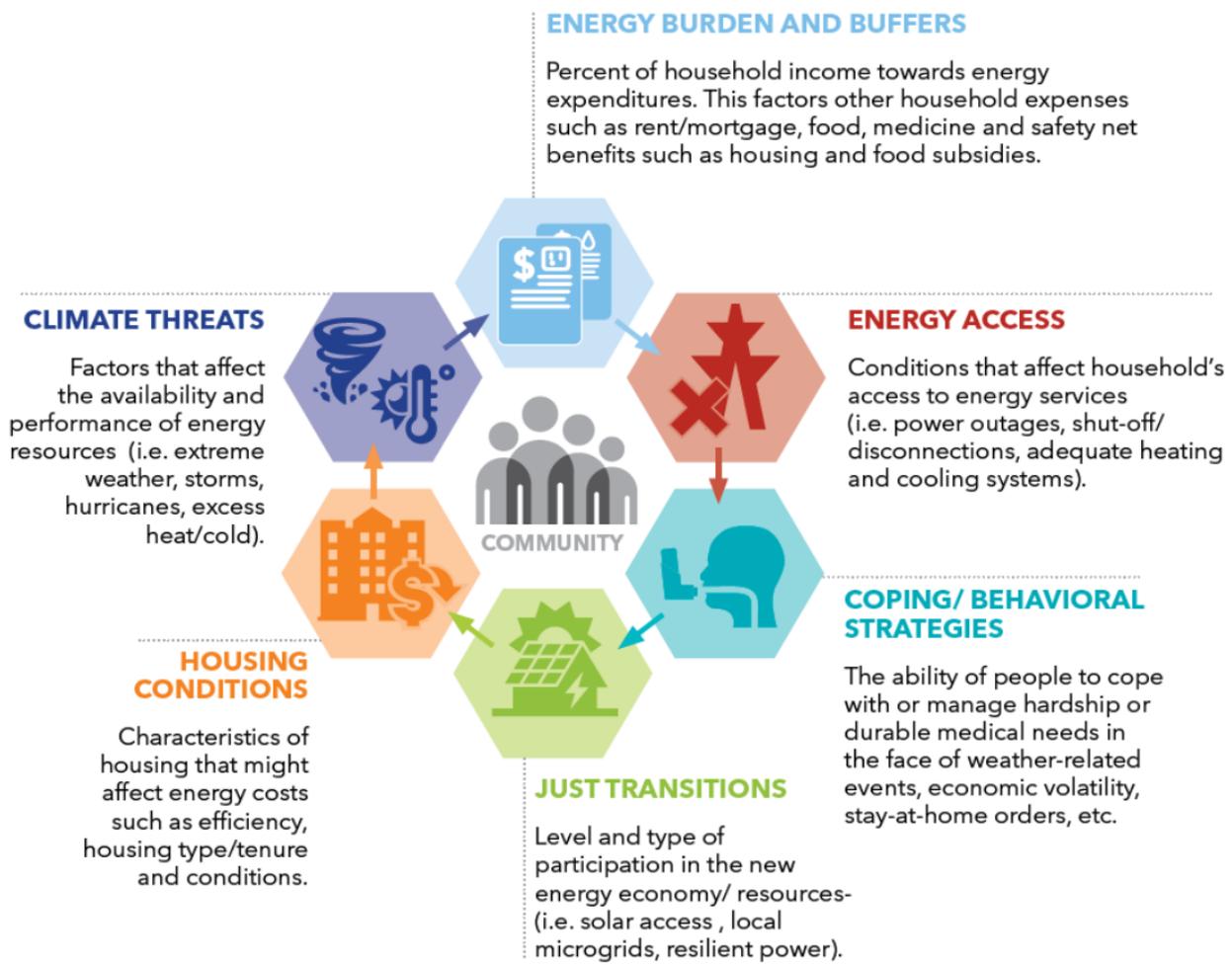
The state’s climate environment is anticipated to increase in severity. The Office of the Texas State Climatologist projects that we should expect warmer weather, more wildfires, and urban flooding, plus increased impacts from hurricanes.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the state’s environmental prevention readiness is weak, illustrated by its low-performance rankings – 41<sup>ST</sup> as the worst state for the environment<sup>12</sup>, No. 1 in carbon dioxide emissions<sup>13</sup>, and an ‘F’ for its treatment of climate change in science education<sup>14</sup>.

**“The grid isn’t fixed yet, and some of the most important structural decisions haven’t even been made. Texas is relying on regulators appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott to keep up the hard work.”<sup>15</sup>**

**Energy Insecurity Effects**

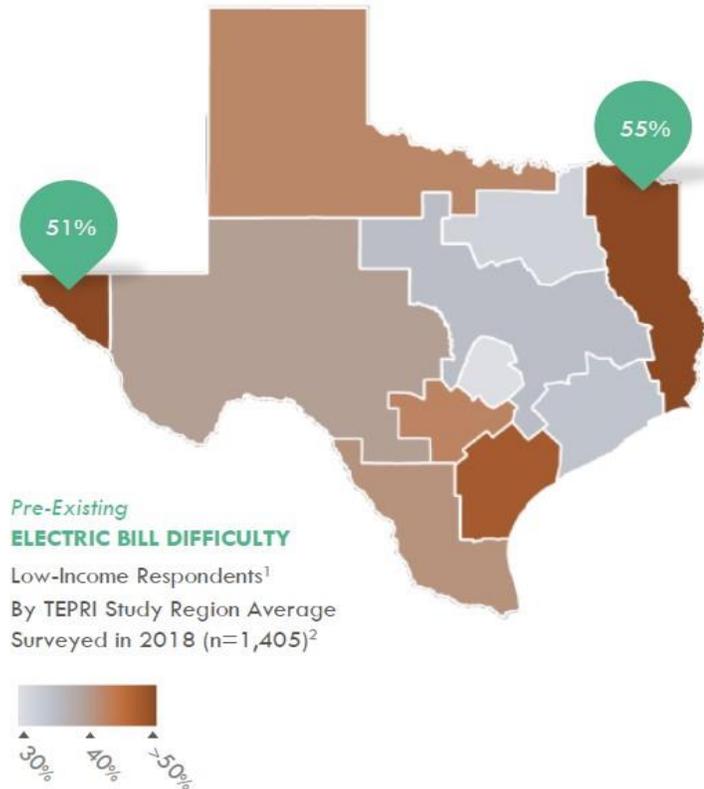
Energy Insecurity means an inability to adequately meet basic household energy needs. Its impact includes three dimensions: Economic, Physical-Inefficiencies, and Behavioral (Figure below).<sup>16</sup>

**UNDERSTANDING ENERGY INSECURITY**



Like Covid-19, the Winter Storm amplified disparities in people’s and communities’ vulnerabilities. The storms’ effects surfaced energy insecurity issues, i.e., energy cost burdens, trade-offs to pay utility bills, housing weatherization and energy efficiency conditions, stress-related to energy access and affordability, and health effects.

According to the Texas Energy Poverty Research Institute, people struggling with energy insecurity were already forced to make trade-offs with limited resources. The pandemic has compounded the struggle (Map below).<sup>17</sup> They observed a definite trend in unaffordable electric bills among Latinos (49%) and Blacks (49%).



Source: Texas Energy Poverty Resource Institute, April 22, 2020

Black and Latino households are more likely to experience energy insecurity and face utility disconnection. Additionally, it is prevalent among households at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, families with young children, individuals requiring electronic medical devices, and those living in homes in poor condition and energy inefficient.<sup>18</sup>

Logic would conclude that the preceding increased the challenges to economic mobility - moving out of poverty or low-come status. Moreover, research indicates that natural disasters contribute to the widening of the racial wealth gap.<sup>19</sup> It’s argued that the uneven distribution of relief funds is a significant contributor to this effect.

Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, several federal, state, and local government protections (federal stimulus funds) were put in place to protect low-income Americans from economic hardship and

energy insecurity, including eviction and utility disconnection moratoriums. However, the pandemic-related ‘stimulus’ funding and moratoriums are being eliminated.

Yet, it’s estimated that Latinos and Blacks pay 20% and 43% more of their income on energy costs than non-Latino Whites. Further, that greater home energy efficiency would reduce the energy burden by 35% for low-income households and 42% and 68%, respectively for African American and Latino households.<sup>20</sup> The challenge is their ability to afford repairs and upgrades to inadequate home insulation, heating, or air conditioning equipment. Many Latinos and Blacks tend to own older homes where repairs and upgrades are most needed.

### **Equitable Climate-Energy Policymaking**

Finally, Latinos, Blacks, and low-income populations paid a larger portion of their income toward energy costs before the Covid-19 pandemic. The risks of energy shut-off worsened during and after the pandemic and the Winter Storm. Indeed, their energy insecurity was exasperated. State policymakers have added a further burden – Texans are being asked to bear the costs of the Winter Storm by paying higher rates.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, the Hobby Report also noted that Texans oppose proposals that would require consumers to pay an additional fee to fund electricity generator weatherization efforts and to increase the amount of reserve electricity generation capacity:

- 62% and 54% opposed these two policies respectively, compared to only 18% and 24% in support.
- 51% are unwilling to pay any additional amount on their monthly electricity bill to safeguard the Texas electrical grid from severe weather.
- 69% agree that Texas is more likely to be adversely affected by severe weather than was the case 30 years ago due to climate change.

Indications are that policymakers are not listening or responding to the objections from all Texans that the report identifies. For Latinos, Blacks, and low-income communities, their concerns for equity energy-driven policies that address climate change and corresponding disasters are even lesser concerns.

Multiple institutionally based approaches toward equitable climate/energy policymaking have been proposed.<sup>22</sup> While they may be applicable and have merit, they appear short on addressing social justice concerns, particularly given the political difference and polarization regarding climate change. Moreover, the energy industry’s well-documented obstruction to change is evident regarding energy policymaking.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution because of the needed scale and speed of the energy transition. Policy types must vary to adequately support communities affected by a shift away from coal, oil, and natural gas. Texas’ discriminatory history with affected people of color and low-income communities must consider their respective impact, demographic changes, geographies, and politics.

**“Policy packages that address the climate crisis alongside income inequality, racial injustice, and the economic crisis are more popular among voters.”<sup>23</sup>**

Two ‘policy packaged’ examples include:<sup>24</sup>

- A San Antonio coalition of 23 community organizations called attention to the intersections of structural racism, energy justice, and long-time health inequities exposed by the pandemic, and a
- Texas Impacts (faith-based state organization) ‘Light and Life’ report recommends the Public Utility Commission of Texas Sunset Review use a health equity policy lens across all segments of the electric power industries – natural gas, coal, nuclear, wind, solar, and hydroelectric.

In summary, Latinos and allies are demonstrating concern and policy advocacy in climate change issues from social justice and economic mobility approaches. They must continue demanding equitable policies and programs to address climate change preparedness and energy insecurity, as well as, at the voting booth to replace unresponsive political leadership.

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<sup>2</sup> “U.S. Latinos among hardest hit by pay cuts, job losses due to coronavirus”, [COVID-19 pay cuts, job losses hit Hispanics more than Americans overall | Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/02/16/covid-19-pay-cuts-job-losses-hit-hispanics-more-than-americans-overall/), and “The Widespread Impact of Covid-19 on Latinos”, <https://beyondchron.org/the-widespread-impact-of-covid-19-on-latinos/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Findings on Disproportionate Risks of Climate Change to Hispanic and Latino Individuals”, September 2021, [https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-11/factsheet\\_hispanic-and-latino.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-11/factsheet_hispanic-and-latino.pdf), and “Latinos Communities and Climate Change: Why we care and what we can do”,

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<sup>4</sup> “Climate Change is Disproportionately Affecting Black and Brown Communities in Texas”,

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<sup>6</sup> “Preliminary Estimates of Economic costs of the February 2021 Texas Winter Storm”, The Perryman Group, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> “February 2021 Winter Storm-Related Deaths – Texas” THHS, Texas Department of State Health Services, December 31, 2021. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/02/texas-winter-storm-final-death-toll-246/>

<sup>8</sup> “The Texas Winter Storm and Power Outages Killed Hundreds More People Than the State Says”,

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<sup>9</sup> “How Texas’ power grid failed in 2021 – and who’s responsible for preventing a repeat”, The Texas

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<sup>10</sup> “The Winter Storm of 2021”, Hobby School of Public Affairs, University of Houston,

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<sup>11</sup> “Assessment of Historic and Future Trends of EXTREME WEATHER IN TEXAS, 1900-2036”, Office of the Texas State Climatologist, Texas A&M University, 2021.

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<sup>14</sup> “Making the Grade? How State Public School Science Standards Address Climate Change”, National Center for Science Education and the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, October 2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2022/04/24/gov-abbott-you-arent-done-fixing-the-electrical-grid/>.

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<sup>22</sup> “Policy Options to Enable an Equitable Energy Transition”, Resources for the Future, Report 21-09, April 2021, Daniel Raimi, Editor; and “Six Ways to Prioritize Equity in Energy Efficiency and Climate Policy”, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/six-ways-prioritize-equity-energy-efficiency-and-climate-policy>.

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