

Hundreds of thousands face Christmas holidays without electricity in US and Canada

By James Brewer
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Hundreds of thousands were without electrical power over the Christmas holiday after ice storms whipped across the Northeastern US and Canada. The continuing cold forced many to abandon their homes for warming centers and shelters. The storms have been blamed for 27 deaths—17 in the US and 10 in Canada.

The worst hit was Michigan, where on Christmas Day, according to NBC News, 218,000 homes and businesses were without power, down from a peak of half-million who lost electricity in the state.

Utility workers from Georgia, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Illinois and Missouri are reportedly en route to Flint, Michigan, the former automotive center of General Motors, which has been particularly hard-hit. Last Monday, 65,000 customers of Consumers Energy were without electricity.

Southwest of Flint, Shiawasee County had an estimated 11,000 households without power on Thursday, the fifth day of the storm. In the largely rural area, that figure represents a significant portion of the population. TJ Clark, county emergency management coordinator, stated in a televised press conference on Thursday, “On top of power being out, we are most concerned about the extreme cold. We need people to be checking on their neighbors. If you’re seeing this broadcast, we know there are residents that can’t ... Go out, knock on doors, make sure people are okay.”

Michigan’s capital, Lansing, was mostly in the dark last Friday, after a Board of Water and Light substation went down and brought three other substations down with it. Traffic lights were out and court proceedings were disrupted in the downtown area.

Maine’s *Morning Sentinel* reported an estimated 123,000 households without power in the state over Christmas, with dozens of emergency warming centers opening up on Christmas Eve.

In Toronto, Ontario, some 250 miles northeast of Detroit, 54,000 households had no power on Christmas Day after a reported peak of 300,000 outages. Several deaths were caused when people were asphyxiated by fumes when attempting to use kerosene or other combustion heaters to warm their homes. Toronto Hydro warned residents in Canada’s most populous city that more power outages could be on the way because of damaging snow on Thursday.

Ice storms are the result of snow falling through atmospheric layers with different temperatures, causing melted snowflakes to freeze instantly on contact with frigid ground—or trees and elevated power lines. According to the *Weather Channel* (weather.com) the ice can cause the weight of tree branches to increase “by 30 times” and “add 500 pounds of extra weight” to power lines. Combined with severe winds, the occurrence of falling trees and branches is rife, resulting in widespread pulling down of power cables and outages.

Utility companies have been overwhelmed with demand for emergency crews to restore power. The devastation caused by ice storms is a regular seasonal occurrence over a wide geographical region, yet investment in the infrastructure to either reroute electrical cables or beef up the maintenance of elevated power lines is virtually non-existent.

Seasonal weather phenomena only exacerbate the conditions facing large parts of the population, who are being affected by joblessness, underemployment, poverty and homelessness as funding assistance programs are continually being slashed.

The 2014 budget for LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) is just 90 percent of what it was in 2013. Over the last several years, when need for home heating assistance has increased, funding has

been reduced, almost being halved over the last four years.

Meanwhile, utility monopolies like DTE Energy and Consumers Power in Michigan continue to shut off service to hundreds of thousands of homes for late or non-payment of bills. In 2012, Consumer reported 137,357 shutoffs and DTE 153,208. In the first nine months of 2013, Consumer shut off service to 118,203 homes and DTE reported 169,407 shutoffs.

The corporate owners of DTE continued to rack up large returns last year with the Fortune 500 company taking in \$610 million in profits. Its CEO Gerald Anderson was paid \$9.6 million in compensation.

Weather reports indicate another bout of ice storms is predicted for this weekend.

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