

Number of People Who Died In Winter Storm Still Unknown

Medical officials are still tallying the people who lost their lives in February's "unique" freeze.

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Julia Reihls/KUT

An ambulance drives down N. Lamar Blvd. in Austin on Feb. 17, 2021.

We'll probably never know exactly how many people died in the winter storm that hit Texas last month. The current count is in the dozens, but officials say the true number could be far higher. Confirming that, however, is difficult, according to Dr. Pramod Gumpeni, assistant deputy chief medical examiner at Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences.

Gumpeni's office is responsible for investigating how people died in Harris County, particularly when a crime or a disaster is involved. He told the Texas Standard that sometimes, deciphering a deceased person's manner of death can take a long time. That lag time makes it hard to track the full toll of the storm.

"There are further studies we do, which take a longer. And that's what usually leads up to that lag time between, you know, someone dying, someone being examined at our office and then just finally issuing that cause and manner of death," Gumpeni said.

Most people who died during the storm were killed by hypothermia, exposure or gas inhalation from generators or vehicles used to try to keep warm. The length of the power outages caused by the storm increased the number of people who lost their lives.

"I think it really did catch [Texans] unaware that the temperatures are going to drop this low ... not just, you know, one or two nights, but for almost five nights in a row," Gumpeni said. "And then built on top of that, the problems we have with our infrastructure led to people being exposed to temperatures without having the ability to heat their homes or, you know, properly warm themselves. So I think that's what made this unique."

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