

## PANDEMIC

# Study shows increased COVID-19 deaths from power shut-offs

Miranda Willson, E&E News reporter Published: Thursday, January 28, 2021

A national moratorium on utility service shut-offs last year could have slowed the spread of COVID-19 and saved lives nationwide, according to new research.

Coronavirus infection rates last year were 4.4% lower in communities that banned electricity and water service disconnections during the pandemic, while death rates from the disease were 7.4% lower, said the **study**, which was published this week by the National Bureau of Economic Research. If the United States had instituted a national ban on utility shut-offs from the onset of the pandemic through November, infections would have dropped by an estimated 8.7% nationwide and deaths would have been 14.8% lower, the study said.

Researchers at Duke University analyzed county-level infection and death rates between March and November of last year, comparing counties that prevented utilities from shutting off electricity and water with those that did not. The researchers controlled for the impacts of state and federal policies, such as the coronavirus rescue package and statewide mask mandates, as well as factors affecting one's likelihood of contracting or dying from COVID-19, including the average age of residents and rates of preexisting conditions.

Counties that halted shut-offs had seven fewer deaths per 100,000 residents due to the implementation of those policies, while infections were also lower, the study found.

"These policies were initially adopted as a response to financial hardship because of the pandemic, but what we find in this analysis is they're actually an effective intervention for stopping the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19," said Kay Jowers, a senior policy associate with the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University and a co-author of the report. "So it's benefiting us all."

The researchers also looked at how eviction bans were correlated with COVID-19 infections and deaths, finding that a national moratorium on evictions would have reduced infections by 14.2% and deaths by 40.7%. But while a nationwide pause on evictions has been in place throughout most of the pandemic, there have not been any national measures that have halted utility shut-offs.

Pausing electricity and water service disconnections as the pandemic continues could make it easier for energy-insecure Americans to follow public health recommendations, Jowers said.

"If you don't have water and electricity, it's difficult to comply with stay-at-home recommendations, from remote schooling, working from home, all of those things," she said.

## Biden pressure

The research findings give new credence to activists' calls to halt utility service shut-offs as the pandemic rages on. Earlier this month, more than 600 environmental and social justice organizations sent a **letter** to the incoming administration requesting that President Biden sign an executive order pausing shut-offs of electricity, water and internet services. Last July, Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) and Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) also introduced legislation that would have stopped utility shut-offs during the pandemic.

The Biden administration has not responded to activists' recent calls for a moratorium, said Jean Su, energy justice director at the Center for Biological Diversity, who was not involved in the National Bureau of Economic Research study. The research, however, shows the urgent need for a moratorium, she said.

"We've been fighting for this from a lens of basic dignity and human rights, and we've gotten a lot of public support from Congress members," Su said. "But this study in particular ties it horrifically, terrifyingly and critically to COVID."

People who have their electric service disconnected might decide to go live with a relative or friend, which could put them at higher risk of contracting the coronavirus by exposing them to more people, according to Su. Those who are infected with COVID-19 and have had their electricity turned off could also find it more difficult to care for themselves.

"Electricity and water are part of cascading health impacts that are leading to greater COVID deaths and infections," Su said.

While a number of states, cities and counties implemented moratoriums on utility disconnections early on in the pandemic, measures in 22 states have since expired, according to the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners. Twelve states have active measures in place banning shut-offs, NARUC data shows.

All investor-owned utilities in the United States voluntarily suspended electricity disconnections last March when the pandemic began and have worked with regulatory agencies to "implement new programs and policies to meet customer needs based on the local circumstances," said Adam Benshoff, vice president of the Edison Electric Institute, which represents investor-owned utilities.

"EEI's members worked quickly to expand their well-established programs designed to reach customers suffering hardships, inform them about payment assistance options, and help them find solutions to their financial challenges," Benshoff said in a statement.