

POWER CRISIS:

Despite Transparency Failures, Utility Information Reveals Major Home Shutoff Problem

More Than 765,000 Household Power Disconnects Reported Across 10 States

By Greer Ryan • Center for Biological Diversity • March 2021

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and Texas energy crisis have both highlighted a crucial fact: Losing power can be lethal. This makes energy access a critical human right.

Yet families continue to lose power not only because of extreme weather and other climate-fueled disasters, but also because of utility greed and government failures to regulate. When Americans cannot pay their essential utility bills, they risk being disconnected from life-sustaining services.

To gauge the scale of the shutoff problem during the current public health crisis, we reviewed data from utility commissions across the United States. Most states do not require private utilities to publicly disclose how many households they have disconnected.

But data from just 10 states that do require disclosure reveals that utilities have performed at least 765,262 household disconnects in those states since the COVID pandemic was declared a national emergency in March 2020. In Georgia one utility reported disconnects equivalent to 6% of its customers.

BACKGROUND

The problem of utility shutoffs for nonpayment is a longstanding crisis. Utilities have been disproportionately burdening low-wealth communities and those of color with high energy costs and shutoffs for years.¹ But during a public health emergency, when Americans have been asked to stay home to protect their own health and that of others, losing power and other essential utility services is particularly dangerous. Recent research has shown that if there had been a nationwide utility-shutoff moratorium in place since March 2020, *as many as 77,000 lives lost to COVID might have been saved.*²

It is clear we need both a short-term solution to stop current shutoffs and a long-term reform of our energy system to address the chronic shutoff problem in this country. The first step to solving these problems requires understanding their scale. Unfortunately, even getting a clear picture of how many households are cut off from power is diffi-

¹ See, e.g., NAACP, *Lights Out in the Cold: Reforming Utility Shut-Off Policies as if Human Rights Matter* (March 2017), <https://www.naacp.org/climate-justice-resources/lights-out-in-the-cold/>.

² Researchers found that if moratoria on disconnections had been in place across all U.S. counties from March 2020 to November 2020, COVID-related deaths could have been reduced by 14.8%. Applying this percentage to the more than 525,000 deaths as of March 8, 2021, we estimate 77,700 deaths that might have been avoided had a federal moratorium been in place. See National Bureau of Economic Research, *Housing Precarity & the COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts of Utility Disconnection and Eviction Moratoria on Infections and Deaths Across US Counties* (January 2021), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w28394>.

cult because public data is very limited. Some utilities are required by state utility commissions to provide this data and report it to the public. But the majority of commissions do not require utilities to report it. And even among the minority that do, most commissions do not make the data accessible and understandable to the public.

KEY FINDINGS

What little we know about disconnects for nonpayment:

- **Data from just 10 states shows more than three-quarters of a million disconnects since COVID was declared a national emergency one year ago.** The overwhelming majority of these disconnects were likely for nonpayment. Although disconnect reports are limited, those we found amount to more than 765,262 household disconnects.³ This figure does not include the 14% of Americans served by public power.
- **Some major private utilities disconnecting power include:**
 - Duke Energy, which reported nearly 98,000 disconnects across three states (Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina), equivalent to 2% of the company’s customers in those states. In Florida, Duke Energy reported disconnects equivalent to 3% of its customers;*
 - Georgia Power, which reported more than 131,000 disconnects since July, equivalent to 6% of the company’s customers;
 - Florida Power & Light, which reported more than 255,000 disconnects since October, equivalent to 3% of the company’s customers.

These three utilities’ disconnects are equivalent to 2.6% of their customers in the four states. If this percentage were applied to the total 120,756,048 households⁴ in the United States, that would equal **nearly 3.14 million household disconnects** during the pandemic.

- **The vast majority of states do not require private utilities to publicly disclose their household disconnects:**
 - Only 20 state utility commissions clearly provide data on disconnects from regulated utilities. Ten of these states report 0 disconnects since March 2020, in large part due to shutoff moratoria (both voluntary and mandatory).
 - 30 states do not require any public reporting of disconnect data:
 - 6 commissions apparently require this data but don’t require it be made public without a records request;
 - 13 commissions confirmed they do not collect this data;
 - 11 commissions did not respond to our questions and do not provide easily searchable data.

METHODOLOGY

In late February and early March 2021, we searched all 50 state utility commissions’ electronic dockets and filings for keywords including “disconnect” and “involuntary termination.” We also reached out to all utility commissions via phone calls and/or emails (per website instructions) to ask whether they collect disconnect data and, if so, where it is located. Some utility commissions did not respond to our requests.

³ The timelines for these disconnect reports vary (e.g., some utilities reported disconnects since July and some reported disconnects since November) but the latest data included is for January 2021. For some states, only the major investor-owned utility reports were captured.

⁴ See U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts: United States, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/HSD410219#HSD410219>.

DETAILED RESULTS

State	Disconnect Data Findings	Source
Alabama	The Alabama Public Service Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Alaska	The Regulatory Commission of Alaska does not collect this data.	Docket search and email confirmation
Arizona	The Arizona Corporation Commission does not collect this data, other than what is shared in annual reports by some utilities. 2020 data is not yet available, as of March 1, 2021.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Arkansas	The Arkansas Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
California	The California Public Utilities Commission has multiple dockets related to utility disconnects, including historical data. But the state has had a moratorium in place on shutoffs for regulated utilities since April and reports no disconnects since then.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Colorado	The Colorado Public Service Commission collects data on disconnects from regulated utilities. Black Hills Energy and Public Service Company of Colorado, the state's two IOUs, reported a total of 2,179 disconnects for October through December and December through January, respectively.	Docket search and phone confirmation See Proceeding No. 20M-0267EG
Connecticut	The Connecticut Public Utilities Regulatory Authority collects this data, but it is difficult to parse through. The total disconnects for Eversource, the state's major IOU, appear to be 17,445 for December 2020 and January 2021, the only months for which disconnects are reported.	Docket search and phone call See Docket No. 20-03-15.
Washington, D.C.	The DC Commission appears to collect this data, based on a docket search. But it has had a moratorium on shutoffs since the beginning of the pandemic.	Docket search
Delaware	The Delaware Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Florida	Regulated utilities have submitted disconnect data at the end of each month since September 2020. Florida Power and Light reports 255,870 disconnects between October and January (no disconnects reported in September). Duke Energy Florida reports 64,427 disconnects between September and January.	Docket search and phone call
Georgia	The Georgia Public Service Commission collects disconnect data for regulated utilities. Georgia Power, the state's largest utility, reports 131,683 disconnects since the mandatory moratorium on shutoffs expired in July 2020 until January 2021.	Docket search and phone call See Docket No. 42516

Hawaii	Hawaii's Public Utilities Commission requires reporting on disconnects. Since the state has had a mandatory moratorium in place, utilities are currently reporting zero disconnects for nonpayment.	Docket search. See Docket No. 2020-0209
Idaho	Idaho's Public Utilities Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Illinois	The Illinois Commerce Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Indiana	Indiana's Utility Regulatory Commission does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.	Phone call and docket search See Cause 45380
Iowa	Iowa's Utilities Board collects disconnect data. MidAmerican and Interstate Power and Light, two major utilities, reported 12,922 disconnects in the second half of 2020.	Phone call and docket search See "Residential Past Due Accounts & disconnect Data" webpage.
Kansas	The Kansas Corporation Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Kentucky	The Kentucky Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Louisiana	The Louisiana Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Maine	The Maine Public Utilities Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Maryland	The Maryland Public Service Commission collects some monthly disconnect data. Major utility Potomac Edison reports no disconnects for nonpayment. Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) and Delmarva are not reporting disconnect data.	Docket search See "PC53/COVID-19 Utility Reports" webpage
Massachusetts	The Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities collects this data. National Grid and Eversource, the state's major utilities, are reporting no disconnects due to the back-to-back COVID-related moratorium and cold weather moratorium.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission See Docket No. 20-58
Michigan	The Michigan Public Service Commission seemingly does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Minnesota	The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission requires reporting on disconnects. Since the state has had a mandatory moratorium in place (first for COVID, then per the state's "cold weather rule," utilities are reporting zero disconnects for nonpayment.	Docket search and phone confirmation See Docket No. 20-375
Mississippi	The Mississippi Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission

Missouri	The Missouri Public Service Commission collects monthly disconnect data. The Public Staff created a report compiling all regulated utilities' responses.	Docket search and email confirmation See Case No. AW-2020-0356 and Staff Report
Montana	The Montana Public Service Commission seemingly does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Nebraska	The Nebraska Public Services Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Nevada	The Nevada Public Utilities Commission seemingly does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.	Docket search and phone confirmation
New Hampshire	The New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission seemingly does collect this data, but requires a FOIA request to access.	Docket search and phone confirmation
New Jersey	The New Jersey Board of Public Utilities does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
New Mexico	The New Mexico Public Regulation Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
New York	The New York Department of Public Service does collect this information. Since the state has had a mandatory moratorium in place, utilities are currently reporting zero disconnects for nonpayment.	Docket search and phone confirmation See Case Number 91-M-0744
North Carolina	Regulated utilities report total number of residential disconnects for nonpayment at the end of each month. Duke Energy has reported 16,561 disconnects in January 2021.** Dominion North Carolina has reported 2,345 disconnects since November 2020.	Docket search and phone confirmation See Docket No. M-100, Sub 61A
North Dakota	The North Dakota Public Service Commission collects monthly disconnect reports from the three major utilities, but does not provide total counts. Each disconnect is provided as a line item in a table, mixed with gas and commercial disconnects. The total across utilities seems to be 1000-2000 residential electric customers since September.	Docket search
Ohio	The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio does not appear to have collected this data for 2020. Some data for previous years is available in Case No. 19-974-GE-UNC.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Oklahoma	The Oklahoma Corporation Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; utility commission staff did not know if information was available but suggested to look on website
Oregon	The Oregon Public Utilities Commission collects disconnect data for safety reasons and might collect it for nonpayment, but would require a FOIA to access.	Docket search and phone confirmation

Pennsylvania	The Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission collects monthly disconnect reports from the major regulated utilities. Although some utilities continue to refrain from disconnecting customers, others just started reporting disconnects, with 1,921 disconnects reported in January 2021.	Docket search and phone confirmation See Docket No. M-2020-3019244
Rhode Island	The Rhode Island Division of Public Utilities and Carriers does collect this data, but its sole IOU is reporting no disconnects due to the back-to-back COVID-related moratorium and cold weather moratorium.	Docket search and email confirmation See Docket 1725 for historical data
South Carolina	Regulated utilities have submitted disconnect data at the end of each month since September 2020. Duke Energy reports 17,128 disconnects from October through December. Dominion Energy reports 15,708 disconnects for that same time period. Lockhart Power reports 144 disconnects.	Docket search and phone call See Docket No. 2006-193-EG
South Dakota	The South Dakota Public Utilities Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Tennessee	The Tennessee Public Utility Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Texas	The Public Utility Commission of Texas does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Utah	The Utah Public Service Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Vermont	The Vermont Public Utility Commission does collect this data, but its sole IOU reports zero disconnects due to the back-to-back COVID-related moratorium and cold weather moratorium.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Virginia	The Virginia State Corporation Commission does not appear to collect this data.	Docket search; no confirmation from utility commission
Washington	The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission does collect this data, but regulated utilities are not reporting disconnects because the state has been under a moratorium.	Docket search and phone confirmation
West Virginia	The Public Service Commission of West Virginia does provide this data, but it is difficult to parse through. Disconnects for November and December for the major IOU seem to amount to about 34 total accounts.	Docket search and phone confirmation See Order EGCT
Wisconsin	The Wisconsin Public Service Commission does not provide this data publicly.	Docket search and phone confirmation
Wyoming	The Wyoming Public Service Commission does not collect this data.	Docket search and email confirmation

If you have updates for us, please email gryan@biologicaldiversity.org.

CONCLUSION: BOTH IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM FEDERAL ACTION NEEDED

The patchwork nature of state moratoria means that a nationwide utility-shutoff moratorium is crucial so that no family is left behind. Though the House of Representatives passed a nationwide moratorium on shutoffs in the HEROES Act in 2020, Congress has failed to enact the moratorium to date. The most recent America Rescue Plan Act of 2021⁵ fails to include the national protection, with only \$4.5 billion dedicated to low-income home energy assistance, a miniscule fraction of the estimated \$25 billion in outstanding electricity customer debt.

The #NoShutOffs Coalition, a national coalition of more than 1,200 organizations, has pushed for the moratorium through legislative action⁶ or executive order⁷ as immediate COVID relief. Long-term solutions require wholesale energy system reform — including rapid deployment of rooftop and community solar and storage to lower energy burdens and increase climate resilience, as well as transparency in shutoff data to track the chronic problem.

**Correction:* Duke Energy performed more than 126,000 disconnects in these three states. The 98,000 value does not include North Carolina disconnect data for November and December.

***Duke Energy performed a total of 45,405 disconnects in North Carolina from November 2020 through January 2021.*

⁵ H.R. 1319, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.budget.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/American%20Rescue%20Plan%20Act%20SEN-ATE.pdf>.

⁶ In Next Coronavirus Rescue Bill, 830 Groups Urge Congress to Halt Electricity, Water, Broadband Shutoffs (April 13, 2020), <https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/next-coronavirus-rescue-bill-830-groups-urge-congress-halt-electricity-water-broadband-shutoffs-2020-04-13/>.

⁷ 600+ Groups Urge Biden to Halt Water, Electricity, and Broadband Shutoffs through Emergency Executive Order on Day 1 (January 13, 2021), <https://foodandwaterwatch.org/news/600-groups-urge-biden-halt-water-electricity-and-broadband-shutoffs-through-emergency-executive>.