

# **Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago**

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On Thursday, July 13, 1995, Chicagoans awoke to a blistering day in which the temperature would reach 106 degrees. The heat index, which measures how the temperature actually feels on the body, would hit 126 degrees by the time the day was over. Meteorologists had been warning residents about a two-day heat wave, but these temperatures did not end that soon. When the heat wave broke a week later, city streets had buckled; the records for electrical use were shattered; and power grids had failed, leaving residents without electricity for up to two days. And by July 20, over seven hundred people had perished—more than twice the number that died in the Chicago Fire of 1871, twenty times the number of those struck by Hurricane Andrew in 1992—in the great Chicago heat wave, one of the deadliest in American history.

Heat waves in the United States kill more people during a typical year than all other natural disasters combined. Until now, no one could explain either the overwhelming number or the heartbreaking manner of the deaths resulting from the 1995 Chicago heat wave. Meteorologists and medical scientists have been unable to account for the scale of the trauma, and political officials have puzzled over the sources of the city's vulnerability. In *Heat Wave*, Eric Klinenberg takes us inside the anatomy of the metropolis to conduct what he calls a "social autopsy," examining the social, political, and institutional organs of the city that made this urban disaster so much worse than it ought to have been.

Starting with the question of why so many people died at home alone, Klinenberg investigates why some neighborhoods experienced greater mortality than others, how the city government responded to the crisis, and how journalists, scientists, and public officials reported on and explained these events. Through a combination of years of fieldwork, extensive interviews, and archival research, Klinenberg uncovers how a number of surprising and unsettling forms of social breakdown—including the literal and social isolation of seniors, the institutional abandonment of poor neighborhoods, and the retrenchment of public assistance programs—contributed to the high fatality rates. The human catastrophe, he argues, cannot simply be blamed on the failures of any particular individuals or organizations. For when hundreds of people die behind locked doors and sealed windows, out of contact with friends, family, community groups, and public agencies, everyone is implicated in their demise.

As Klinenberg demonstrates in this incisive and gripping account of the contemporary urban condition, the widening cracks in the social foundations of American cities that the 1995 Chicago heat wave made visible have by no means subsided as the temperatures returned to normal. The forces that affected Chicago so disastrously remain in play in America's cities, and we ignore them at our peril.

## **Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago Details**

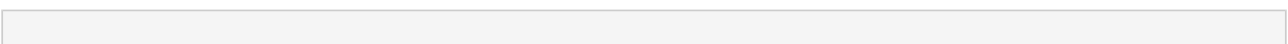
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# **From Reader Review Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago for online ebook**

## **Eric B. Kennedy says**

Klinenberg's "Heat Wave" is an engaging, interesting example of public sociology. The aim of the investigation is the 1995 heatwave in the city, which lasted roughly three days and killed several hundred people. Those who perished were disproportionately vulnerable and senior, without the support of family or friends to ensure their survival during the >100F spell.

The book is accessibly written, with each chapter investigating a different facet of the disaster. The book focuses on four phenomenon: those without social supports, the gulf between rich and marginalized, the city's attempts to PR the crisis away, and the various coverage produced by different media outlets.

All told, the volume provides interesting insight into how different communities thought about the disaster. It does little to separate epistemic from institutional from political influences, but that's largely the point: a crisis such as this emerges because of the way all of these different influences are stacked together.

Would recommend if you have an interest in public sociology, heat disasters, or social justice and disasters.

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## **Sunny Moraine says**

Interesting. Apparently methodologically controversial, at least where a couple people are concerned, though I have yet to read the articles. The examinations of death rates by age, race, socioeconomic status, and geographical location are extremely compelling, but when Eric gets political he gets a little ranty and I understand the POV of the people who claim he's working off certain biases. Still, good read. Recommended.

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## **Wealththeow says**

A mixture of sociology, epidemiology, and personal anecdotes of those who survived or died during a heat wave in a modern US city. Very moving, and does an excellent job of convincing the reader that social isolation and a lack of support for vulnerable populations (most particularly, the elderly poor) kill.

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## **Comtesse DeSpair says**

The first half of this book, detailing the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave that killed 739 people, is actually quite fascinating. The majority of the deaths were isolated elderly people who lived in poverty-ridden areas, and Klinenberg does an excellent job detailing the social causes for their deaths. The elderly poor victims often had no surviving family members in the area to check on them and were socially isolated, often due to high crime in their neighborhoods. Living on meager social security checks, they could not afford air conditioners or the cost of running them, and did not open their windows for fear their homes would be invaded. Living

check to check means that they could not afford to lose any possessions because they would not be able to replace them, so they would not take the risk. Instead, they overheated and died in their prison-like apartments.

One contrast that I found especially interesting was between my own neighborhood of Little Village on the West Side of Chicago, and the neighborhood immediately adjacent- North Lawndale. Little Village, a Mexican neighborhood, had a very low rate of heat-related illness, whereas North Lawndale, an African-American neighborhood, had many deaths. The social explanation for this discrepancy related to the Mexican cultural emphasis on family and looking out for the elderly, which resulted in providing care that was not provided in North Lawndale.

However, after the first third or so of the book, I found it very dull - much like reading a thesis paper, with few real life examples and many generalizations about the political structure of Chicago and the media presentation of the disaster. Some people might find that stuff interesting, but I ended up skimming the last half of the book. Overall, though, it's a worthwhile read - as well as a warning of tragedies that may await many cities in America in our warmer future.

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### **Kiersten says**

I'll concede that the content has value; it was interesting and eye-opening and appropriately infuriating. I sincerely respect the author's years of effort and the comprehensive research invested into this book. Klinenberg's dedication to the subject is obvious, and I admire it.

However, his writing style was horrific: he was perpetually long-winded and unbelievably prone to redundancy, not qualities I'm searching for in nonfiction. He has no notion of conciseness—he could have conveyed all of the same information in a third of the page count. Also, the extremely academic style made it difficult for me to connect with the content more than superficially, which defeated a lot of the book's purpose, in my opinion. It's definitely not a book I would have either purchased or read were I not a bookish college freshman who dearly values my GPA.

There's been a play based off of the book, however; that I really might be interested in seeing.

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### **Kyle Bell says**

Klinenberg meticulously documents the travesty that was the Chicago heat wave of 1995. The heat wave exposed the significant weaknesses of the service delivery methods of the Chicago municipal government. Heat Wave exposes the systematic breakdown of local government at multiple levels in Chicago. Mid-level bureaucrats failed to communicate across departments. The mayor and his administration refused to even acknowledge the rising death toll. Indeed, the city failed to even implement its own emergency management plan for the disaster.

Even worse, both the fire and police commissioner claimed that their departments were not overwhelmed, despite substantial evidence to the contrary. Instead, they deflected blame onto the victims themselves; essentially saying they were not "smart consumers" of the city's services. "We're talking about people who die because they neglect themselves," the police superintendent told the press (p.172). These actions were part of a concerted effort to govern and manage media coverage through public relations tactics.

Mayor Daley was similarly guilty of managing the city through public relations denial techniques. Daley questioned the medical examiner's death totals, wondering publicly if the numbers were "really real". Further, the mayor's office attempted to silence public employees, denying responsibility and renaming the event from a man-made social disaster to a meteorological one. Finally, the mayor created a commission that exonerated his administration of any wrongdoing or negligence. Instead, they claimed that "government alone cannot do it all".

Klinenberg's assertion is two-fold. First, he argues that the city did not take the threat of the heat wave seriously, failed to implement their own plan, and massively bungled the aftermath. Second, and more importantly, neoliberalism, through privatization, contracting out of services, and government/business divestment of poor neighborhoods, made the conditions possible for the disaster to happen in the first place.

On the first point, the seven hundred plus death toll is testament to the failure. This likely underestimates the number of deaths due to the fact that only those that died in the city were counted rather than those that might have been transported to a suburban hospital. The deaths were preventable. The city government and media failed to properly warn residents, instead using cutesy, even condescending language about the vulnerable.

The city (and federal government) also failed on a number of other measures. There was not a concerted effort in place to reach out to elderly residents. A lack of energy assistance, the result of federal budget cuts, meant that fixed-income residents were unable to afford air-conditioning on a regular basis. Transportation to cooling centers was insufficient and unreliable. Emergency vehicles failed to respond in a timely manner; some victims had to wait over 30 minutes for an ambulance. Those that did respond often found that hospitals were refusing patients. Twenty-three of forty-five local hospitals in Chicago were on "bypass status".

Klinenberg portrays neoliberalism as the more nefarious of the two causes. High crime areas devoid of investment from any level of government -- essentially abandoned sections of the city -- housed an elderly population that was fearful to go outside. These neighborhoods were described as "bombed out" and "warzones" by their own residents. On top of the lack of jobs, businesses, and services, the ecology of the environment was severely degraded, making it difficult for frail residents to physically travel around.

During the 1999 heat wave, which was longer-lasting than 1995, Chicago mobilized a "Heat Command Center" to check on seniors and provide assistance over the phone. The city added ambulances, contracted with local cab companies to transport city residents to cooling centers, and paid outreach workers to go door to door in neighborhoods with high concentrations of seniors. While the conservative Chicago Tribune editorial board decried these actions as "wasteful," only one hundred and ten people died in all of Cook County versus that seven hundred thirty-nine in 1995. It's clear from the 1999 heat wave that these best practices minimized death in the city -- to a still unacceptable, but substantially improved level -- even without addressing the underlying social impacts of failed neoliberal policies.

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## **Cdon says**

Missed the boat on climate change but an important look at environmental disaster and the role the media, government, culture, and the built environment facilitate (or detract from) life and death.

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## **molly says**

Of course, I have an obligatory heat wave story- I was 9 and spent the worst of it in my dad's North Side apartment without power or AC. We took turns taking cold baths. I was too hot to even read. That's how you know it's bad.

Despite the fact that I was there, I never realized what a public health disaster this heat wave (and other previous and subsequent ones) was for Chicago until this book was assigned to me in grad school. A quick survey of Chicagoan friends and family found that not a single one knew of the huge death toll, although they certainly remembered the heat wave. Given the global trends toward creation of larger cities and overall warming climate for many temperate North American cities, this is a very relevant warning.

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## **Catherine says**

Klinenberg has some incredibly smart stuff to say about heat waves - natural disasters that generally cost more lives than any other kind (tsunamis aside, I presume), and yet which are routinely ignored when people think about the challenge of responding to such a public health crisis. There are reasons - not of them especially good - why people don't think of heatwaves in the same way they think of earthquakes or tornadoes: they don't leave carnage behind; there are no dramatic pictures to accompany the news; and the deaths that result from heat waves often point to weaknesses in social infrastructures that most people (especially politicians) would rather ignore.

Yet, Klinenberg argues, it's precisely because heat waves point to those structural weaknesses that they are worth study - and not just in terms of raw data (who died and when; what amenities did they lack), but in terms of how there is an ecology of survival, how physical landscapes can make or unmake an individual's response to life-threatening circumstances, and how the ramifications of all these things are shouldered overwhelmingly by the poor.

I'm 100% persuaded by his argument. That said, he sums everything up in the first chapter and every chapter after that simply repeats. His statistics are impressive, but ultimately they don't add up to a compelling story, and while I think he has great things to offer the way we think about urban environments, I felt he could have said it in about half the time. I get the impression, however, that he's writing very much for an audience of other sociologists, and that the dictates of his discipline explain much of his style. In that case, I'm faulting him for not writing like a historian - not fair of me, but he still only gets two stars as a result.

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## **Joseph Schlesinger says**

A damning indictment of all the dramatis personae who share the blame for what went wrong during the

Chicago heat wave of 1995, resulting in a death toll exceeding 800. This well-presented scholarly analysis examines the factors affecting the city's social structure that contributed to the high mortality rate & the role that the municipal government, public aid agencies, utilities, & media played in this urban tragedy. The worrisome lesson asserted in the book's concluding chapter: a disaster of this magnitude could happen again.

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### **Lora says**

I just saw *Cooked*, a documentary film running in the Environmental Film Fest that is based on this book. The film is still a work in progress so only about 20 minutes were screened but it's a fascinating topic.

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### **Lorianne DiSabato says**

The story of the deadly 1995 Chicago heat wave is fascinating enough, but don't expect Eric Klinenberg's book to be a popularly-accessible page-turner. Klinenberg's book was written as a dissertation in sociology, so its methodology and supporting evidence are sound, but it seems to have been revised only minimally (if at all) for a lay audience.

The upshot of Klinenberg's analysis of what led to so many deaths in Chicago in July, 1995 is that living alone leads to dying alone, as getting out of sweltering tenement apartments and single-occupancy rooms--the kind of accommodations peopled by the urban poor and elderly--is essential for survival in a heat wave. In order to get out of their rooms and apartments, however, both the poor and elderly need to have welcoming (and cool) places to go, they need to feel safe walking their neighborhood streets and sidewalks, and they need to feel connected with (or at least trusting of) their neighbors and surrounding communities.

Klinenberg's book is illustrated with indelible images of the disaster, including photos of emergency workers removing victims in body bags from locked, air-tight apartments: visual proof that it's not the heat nor the humidity that kills in a heat wave; it's the social isolation.

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### **Ashley says**

When you think about disasters that caused a whole bunch of deaths in one swoop in the US in the last 25 or 30 years (outside of a war), you probably think about the September 11 attacks, which killed 2,977 in the US. If I were to ask you what the next biggest disaster in terms of deaths, you'd probably also get it right: Hurricane Katrina and its 1,833 deaths. But do you know what caused the third greatest number of deaths in the past 25 years?

Surprisingly (to me, at least) it was the 1995 Chicago heat wave, which took 733 lives over the course of about a week.

It's been hotter than usually in the Pacific Northwest, where I live. We had multiple days in a row above 90, which may not sound bad to those of you used to sweltering summers, but in general folks out here don't have air conditioning (and if you do have it but you don't have the money for an electric bill of gargantuan proportions, you might just leave it off). My apartment in the evenings was often still in the mid-upper 80s, and we don't even get any direct sunlight (thank goodness for north-facing windows). I also work in public



health emergency preparedness, so I have an extra special interest in things that cause a whole lot of people to get sick and die at once.

Author Dr. Klinenberg is originally from Chicago, and earned his PhD in Sociology at UC Berkely in 2000. Heat Wave is his dissertation, exploring not just the health causes of those 700+ deaths, but the social causes. His thesis is that the hot days didn't kill these people alone; the systems society has set up (or not set up) instead failed many of these people in a complicated way that would be dangerous to ignore if we seek to avoid it in the future.

Much of his work focuses on comparing two neighborhoods that are very similar in some of the basic demographics, and even have the same microclimate, but had VERY different death rates. In one neighborhood (95% black), 40 out of 100,000 residents died in the heat wave; in the neighborhood next door (86% Latino), only 4 out of 100,000 residents died. That is a huge difference, and one that we should try to explain.

Beyond this, he looks at the role of city government and how they responded (or failed to respond), from the front-line police officers who were tasked with community policing but didn't check in on the community, through the fire chiefs who ignored warnings from their staff that they should have more ambulances available, to the health commissioner who didn't really 'get' that something was amiss. Dr. Klinenberg also explores the role the media played in not treating the story with the gravity it deserved until late into the heat wave.

Even if you aren't interested in public health preparedness, or aren't into sociological profiles, I think you might find this book to be quite fascinating. I'm impressed with the readability of what is essentially someone's dissertation, and I think I can learn a lot that will be helpful to me in professional life.

This book got me back on track for my cannonball read, too, so I'm quite grateful for that. I haven't finished a book in nearly three weeks. Between going to Canada for five World Cup matches (including the final – woo!), my computer dying, and learning that my back-up system failed, plus the aforementioned ridiculous heat wave we had, I've mostly wanted to just sit on my ass and play games on my phone. But no more! I'm back to reading and it feels fantastic.

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## **Fishface says**

I had to read this when I learned it was about a major disaster that took place less than 10 years ago, that I somehow never heard about -- and me only 4 hours away by car! While the subject is very interesting, the author tries much too hard to sound scholarly. The five-dollar words and windy sentences make for a very dry read. He also backtracks and repeats himself so much that the point he's trying to make finally gets lost. I have to say, though, the facts and figures he presents are pretty astounding. I had no idea how many people this kills every year, and I definitely had no idea how current-day America kills off its elderly by stranding them in lousy neighborhoods with nobody to look in on them, where they're so scared by the news stories that they barricade themselves into their tiny, airless apartments and don't dare open their windows even when it gets above a hundred degrees. We really are the stupidest people on earth.

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## **BMR, MSW, LSW says**

This book is a good companion to *County*. The missed opportunities, the blatant lies from City Hall and other main actors, the high death toll, it was too much at times and I wanted to throw the book and scream.

It is fascinating to read this 20 years after the Chicago heat wave of July 1995 that killed nearly 800 people. I am a social worker now, and I am aware of many changes that have happened in the "aging network" of people who work with marginalized older adults in the city (including people who are tasked with checking on known isolated persons in extreme heat or extreme cold).

However, I don't doubt that far too many old, isolated citizens would still perish if the same extreme weather event happened now.

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