

10 deaths from record-breaking winter storms across US Gulf Coast

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22 January 2025

An unprecedented winter storm moved across parts of the US Gulf Coast on Tuesday and Wednesday bringing record low temperatures and snowfall, sleet and freezing rain from Texas up through the Carolinas. According to Reuters, at least 10 people were killed by the brutal cold temperatures from the historic Southern storm.

Winter storm warnings were in effect on Wednesday in eight states from Louisiana to Virginia, and a blizzard warning was issued for the first time along parts of Louisiana's coast.

A CNN report noted, "The storm impacted 1,500 miles of the Deep South from the Texas Gulf Coast to the Atlantic Coast of the Carolinas, causing widespread closures and travel disruptions, including stranded motorists and thousands of canceled flights."

On Wednesday, the National Weather Service (NWS) reported, "Major highway and air traffic disruptions, including road closures and flight cancellations, remain a concern, including for areas further west along the Gulf Coast where snow has already come to an end."

The NWS report continued, "These travel impacts may linger for several days given the historic heavy accumulations combined with frigid temperatures, as well as the lack of equipment for clearing roads compared to areas further north more accustomed to this amount of snowfall."

According to electric utility tracking website PowerOutage.us, approximately 60,000 customers were without power across Texas, Louisiana, Florida and Georgia as of Wednesday afternoon. An NWS report warned, "Any power outages across the Gulf Coast and Southeast due to the winter storm will exacerbate the threat from the cold for these areas. A slow recovery is expected Thursday as high temperatures rise around 5-10 degrees [-15 to -12?]."

Decades-old snowfall records were shattered in Louisiana, Alabama and Florida. Preliminary reports said New Orleans recorded 8 inches [20 cm] of snow (the previous high was 2.7 inches [6.8 cm], set in 1963); Mobile, Alabama, recorded 7.5 inches [19.05 cm] (the previous high was 3.6 inches [9.1 cm], set in 1973); and Pensacola, Florida, recorded 7.6

inches [19.3 cm] (the previous high was 2.3 inches [5.8 cm], set in 1954). Milton, Florida, recorded 8.8 inches [22.3 cm], which broke the previous statewide record of 4 inches [10 cm], also set in Milton in 1954.

Meanwhile, the cold temperatures also broke records. For example, Zack Fradella, meteorologist with Fox8 in New Orleans, posted on X: "INCREDIBLE COLD—All-time record temperatures are falling this morning. It's 3° [-16?] in New Iberia, 8° [-13?] in Lake Charles, 5° [-15?] in Lafayette. These are the coldest numbers ever recorded at a few of these sites."

In Tallahassee, the capital city of Florida, where temperatures are typically in the 60s in January, the forecast called for a low of 4 ° on Wednesday. Florida's infrastructure is not equipped for such conditions, as the state lacks a substantial fleet of snowplows and salt trucks.

The lack of preparedness for such an event led to widespread standstills across much of northern Florida. Major highways, including parts of Interstate 10, were shut down due to icy conditions and accidents. Schools and businesses were closed, and residents were advised to stay indoors to avoid hazardous conditions.

Among those who died from the cold temperatures were two people from Austin, Texas, according to city officials. Although the identity of the individuals has not been released, a report by CBS Austin said, "Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services has responded to more than a dozen cold exposure calls since Monday. The Travis County Medical Examiner will investigate the causes of the two deaths."

Another death occurred in Georgia due to freezing temperatures, according to the Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA) Director Chris Stallings. In a press conference on Tuesday, Stallings said, "a critical-needs patient" got hypothermia on Monday night and died. He did not say where the person lived or what specifically led to the person's death.

The other deaths were in Florida, Louisiana and Alabama caused either by hypothermia or vehicular accidents on icy

roads.

Deaths caused by the cold were also reported in other parts of the US as deep sub-zero temperatures took hold. The body of a 35-year-old woman, identified by police as Cassandra Shields, was found on Sunday in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The Minnehaha County Sheriff's Office believes the cause of death was exposure to the extreme cold.

The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office is investigating a possible hypothermia death in Milwaukee that took place on Sunday. The medical examiner said an 80-year-old man was found outside near the intersection of 12th and Orchard after an overnight fall on a sidewalk.

An article published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) in mid-December said the number of people who have died in the US from cold weather-related causes more than doubled between 1999 and 2022. The scientists said that increasing extreme winter weather events due to climate change could be to blame.

The study, which was conducted by researchers at Boston's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women's Hospital, found that underlying causes of the increase could be more frequent extreme winter weather events and the rising burden of risk factors for cold-related mortality, such as homelessness, social isolation and substance use.

The analysis of a total of 40,079 deaths recorded during the 24-year period, in which cold was noted as either an underlying or contributing cause, showed the rate of cold-related deaths more than doubled from .44 per 100,000 people to .92 per 100,000 people.

A review of the article by *Forbes* said, "Cold-related deaths were highest among adults 75 years and older, though people between 45 and 74 experienced the largest annual increase, and men were more likely to die from cold-related deaths than women." It added, "More American Indian, Alaska Native and Black people die every year from cold-related deaths than any other racial or ethnic groups, but Hispanic and white people saw the biggest increases annually in the cold weather-related mortality rate."

Approximately 273 million people—or 80 percent of the population of the contiguous United States—are expected to experience freezing cold over the next seven days, according to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Meteorologists say two factors are likely contributing to the Arctic air mass that has swept across the lower 48 US states. One is the polar vortex, which is stretched out and strong right now. The polar vortex is associated with a southward shift in the jet stream, allowing the cold air to travel into the continental US. The other is a strong ridge of

high pressure that has been building up near Alaska, "which can also help force the jet stream to dive down south over the continental US and bring cold Arctic air with it," according to scientists at NOAA.

The persistence and strength of intense winter weather is connected with global warming. The Earth's global average temperature has been rising since about 1850, and climate science has established that human activity, including the burning of fossil fuels, is accelerating the pace of warming beyond what would occur naturally.

Ocean surface temperatures are rising faster than air temperatures and warmer oceans can drive more intense evaporation and send more water vapor into the air for developing storms. More water vapor typically means heavier rain and snow rates.

According to meteorologist and weather reporter Heather Waldman:

Of all regions on Earth's surface, the Arctic is warming the fastest. This warming creates imbalances in the polar vortex, an area of powerful winds near the Arctic Circle. As climate change continues, snowstorms are still going to be part of the weather we experience. Shifts in moisture and temperature patterns will change where we see that snow and how much.

Some regions could see significantly less snow in the long run as warming air favors more rain than snow. This is a concern for California, which relies on Sierra snowmelt as part of the state's water supply.

Changes in storm track patterns could also lead to relatively infrequent but unusually big snow events like what fell this week in the southern Gulf states.



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