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# Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy Of Disaster In Chicago (Illinois)



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Like motorists who slow down to stare at the aftermath of car crashes, most people are fascinated by meteorologic disasters. The perils of weathering a hurricane, a tsunami's destruction of property, and the human drama of a flood all make for riveting tales of struggle and survival. Yet one kind of weather-related catastrophe -- a deadly wave of heat and humidity -- seems not to get nearly the notice given the others, despite the fact that it kills more than all the other kinds combined. Why heat waves are such a quiet menace and how social conditions contributed to more than 700 deaths during a week-long wave of unprecedented heat and humidity in Chicago in 1995 are the focus of *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, written by sociologist Eric Klinenberg. The term "social isolation" is usually applied to those living in remote locations, but Klinenberg demonstrates that this unfortunate condition also applies to thousands of people (primarily senior citizens) in our nation's largest cities. And so it was in 1995. Thousands of Chicago's elderly lived alone (many of them in or near poverty), isolated in many ways and by many factors. When the record-breaking heat and humidity arrived and stayed, these men and women started dying, one at a time and quietly, behind closed, locked doors. The immediate reasons were apparent. Many seniors did not have air conditioning in their houses or apartments. Of those who did have air conditioning, many chose not to use it, fearing utility bills that they could not afford to pay. Fear of crime kept others from leaving their homes to use free neighborhood "cooling centers." Still other elderly Chicagoans knew, from a physiological standpoint, that they were hot but were simply

unaware that they were in danger. Klinenberg shows in detail how the tragedy was compounded by many factors and interests, including a public health and medical establishment that did not anticipate the magnitude of the looming danger and local news media that treated the severe heat and humidity as little more than a novel topic for lighthearted feature stories. The author also examines key sociological factors relating to the elderly, including the perils of "aging in place" while the surrounding environment changes; the idealization and valuing of personal independence among seniors; and differences between men and women in the establishment of friendships and other interpersonal connections. *Heat Wave* is a fascinating book, in part because the social conditions that led to Chicago's 1995 tragedy still exist, for the most part, throughout our nation and its aging population. People are still at risk. The book is not without its flaws. Klinenberg strays from sociological analysis and into a politicized attack when he examines the 1995 response of Mayor Richard M. Daley and his administration. He makes far too much of the mayor's brief questioning of exactly what constitutes a "heat-related death" -- a question, I might add, that most of us had at the time. The author erroneously claims that the response of the Daley administration was driven more by public-relations damage control than by a desire to understand the tragedy and prevent further deaths and that a report issued by the Mayor's Commission on Extreme Weather Conditions was little more than "spin," when it was in fact the product of careful deliberation by leading figures in public health, medicine, gerontology, meteorology, and other fields. Indeed, the report laid the groundwork for Chicago's successful response to extreme weather, which was credited with saving hundreds of lives in the summer of 1999. The report has been widely requested by and circulated to public health planners throughout the nation. Other descriptions of the mayoral response are similarly off-base. As a deputy commissioner of the Health Department in 1995, I was there for every step of the action, in front of the cameras and microphones and around the table at meetings about emergency response. Klinenberg and his sources were not there. Klinenberg also puts considerable emphasis on racial disparities in the 1995 heat deaths. (The raw death totals indicate a rough parity between mortality rates in the black and white populations, but age-adjusted rates supplied by the author claim otherwise.) In his biography posted on the Web site of Northwestern University, where he teaches, Klinenberg notes his interest in the exploration of "race as a principle of vision, division, and domination." His focus on race is therefore understandable, but many do not see race as the risk factor that he claims it is. Its flaws aside, *Heat Wave* is a thought-provoking examination that challenges everyone in medicine and public health to look beyond our training to consider sociological conditions as risk factors. It issues a call for all segments of the population to reestablish those familial and social connections that we once seemed to have but now, all too

often, do not. John Wilhelm, M.D., M.P.H. Copyright © 2002 Massachusetts Medical Society. All rights reserved. The New England Journal of Medicine is a registered trademark of the MMS. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“By the end of Heat Wave, Klinenberg has traced the lines of culpability in dozens of directions, drawing a dense and subtle portrait of exactly what happened during that week in July.” (Malcolm Gladwell New Yorker) “A trenchant, multilayered and well-written social autopsy of disaster. . . . God is in the details, though, and Klinenberg painstakingly lays out for us both the structural and more proximate policies that led to the disastrous Chicago mortality figures of July 1995.” (Micaela di Leonardo Nation) “Remarkable . . . Klinenberg’s immediate aim is to explain the heat wave’s unprecedented death toll, and he does so with chilling precision. But his ultimate achievement is far more significant. In exploring what made Chicago so vulnerable to disaster in 1995, Klinenberg provides a riveting account of the changes that reshaped urban America during the 1990s and, indeed, throughout the postwar era.” (Jim McNeill American Prospect) “A damning indictment of the malign neglect with which the old, frail and poor and isolated are treated in Chicago.” (John Adams Times Higher Education) “In a typical year more Americans die in heat waves than in all other natural calamities combined. Yet they hardly generate the kind of buzz that hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, or wildfires do. In the compelling, sobering, and exhaustively researched Heat Wave, Eric Klinenberg suggests a plausible reason.” (Diego Ribadeneira Boston Globe) “Heat Wave is not so much a book about weather, as it is about the calamitous consequences of forgetting our fellow citizens. . . . A provocative, fascinating book, one that applies to much more than weather disasters.” (Neil Steinberg Chicago Sun-Times) “Revealing and provocative.” (Tom Vanderbilt London Review of Books) “Trenchant and persuasive. . . . What makes Heat Wave such an essential book at this moment in American politics is that, using the 1995 heat wave as his paradigm, Klinenberg has written a forceful account of what it means to be poor, old, sick and alone in the era of American entrepreneurial government. . . . It’s hard to put down Heat Wave without believing you’ve just read a tale of slow murder by public policy.” (Charles Taylor Salon.com) “Klinenberg creates a compelling sociological history that is in critical and productive conversation with current cultural analyses of catastrophe and contemporary urban sociologies of race, class, and marginality.” (John L. Jackson American Journal of Sociology) “Once in a while it is said, ‘Someone will have to write a book about

this. *Heat Wave . . . is that book on urban catastrophes. Klinenberg has meticulously documented a great tragedy in recent Chicago History. He has written it in a manner which allows scholars, activists, community planners and policy-makers to draw lessons, so that it may never happen again.* (Douglas C. Gills *Urban Studies*) "This masterful study of the intersection of the political and the ecological reveals just how important it is that sociologists look not just at trends or patterns over time, but at specific events. . . . Heat Wave is a great book because it focuses its attention on a tear in the social fabric in order to explore more deeply the normal-time weave, and to raise these critical questions about what might be the institutional forms and the cultural contents of a society that would rescue its citizens who live normally in extremis." (Robin Wagner-Pacifici *Social Forces*) "A riveting account . . . that delves into the processes leading to social isolation, the social and built ecology of urban neighborhoods, and the failure of city, state, and federal governments to prevent or respond to a public health crisis. . . . Heat Wave is well worth a read regardless of one's interest in heat waves or public health. . . . It is well-suited for required reading in public health and social science courses and for fascinating armchair reading." (Karen E. Smoyer *Tomic JAMA*) "Relying on ethnographic fieldwork, spatial and statistical analysis, in-depth interviewing, and archival research, Klinenberg's book is a very accomplished sociological case study, imaginatively conceived, tenaciously researched, and . . . strikingly innovative. The work illuminates the contemporary problems of aging, poverty, and community neglect with great skill and sensitivity. In the process, *Heat Wave* offers an exemplary demonstration of how an intensive, multilayered analytical focus on an extreme case or event can yield fresh insight into the social structures, ecologies, and policies that produce everyday inequity and hardship." (William Sites *Social Service Review*) "It is riveting. It is intellectually exciting. If it is not pathbreaking for the study of political communication, it is nonetheless destined to be a recurrent point of reference and an excellent choice for classroom use. . . . This is a stunningly good book, a rare work with broad vision, theoretical savvy, and prodigious leg work in government bureaus, city news rooms, and tough neighborhoods. . . . Klinenberg touched every base, took no shortcuts, and has produced a sociological masterpiece." (Michael Schudson *Political Communication*) "Heat Wave is an exquisitely written, impeccably researched work, and one could hardly imagine how anyone could do more in a single effort to reveal the deadly social fractures of the cities we live in. In this brilliant book, Klinenberg makes visible the ongoing disaster of poverty and isolation that is silently unraveling in some of the most affluent cities in North America." (Joe Hermer *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*) "The book should be

required reading for all public officials. (Choice) Best Book in Sociology and Anthropology (Association of American Publishers Professional/Scholarly Division) Mirra Komarovsky Book Award (Eastern Sociological Society)

In *Heat Wave*, the author presents a compelling and complex portrait of a natural and social disaster. Many of us might not think of a heat wave as a natural disaster in the way we think, say, of hurricanes or tornadoes or earthquakes. (I hadn't thought this way.) But in the U.S., as the author documents, heat waves have taken more lives than the other three events combined. The 1995 heat wave in Chicago was more than a natural disaster, it was a social disaster. It was social because many of the deaths could have been prevented, the author contends. Through a mix of historical research and interviews, the author shows how issues such as age, race, and economics affected those who lived, and those who died. The author is at his most compelling when he compares North Lawndale and South Lawndale. Although both communities are similar in terms of income, North Lawndale is primarily African American, while South Lawndale is primarily Hispanic. The death rates in North Lawndale were significantly higher than in South Lawndale during the heat wave, and the author presents an extensive study of what might have caused that. He even goes so far as to compare the abilities of small, independent churches (prevalent in North Lawndale) and large, Roman Catholic churches (prevalent in South Lawndale) to look after parishioners. What emerges from the author's extensive research is a complex portrait. Through his research, he brings in numerous players, not only community members but experts from the fields of medicine, politics, science, and journalism. This book is worth reading not only for understanding how a heat wave could kill over 700 people but also for understanding how citizens, politicians, scientists, journalists, and others are likely to react to natural disasters.

Another reviewer claims that the author is literally the only person on earth who cares about this subject. This is illuminating, because his subject is 700 people who died, not exactly because no one cared about them, but because of complex social processes that rendered them invisible and isolated them from anyone who would care about them. The author does a masterful job of analyzing how this came to be so, and in the process offers a convincing and starkly damning portrait of the modern American city and the individualistic, privatizing ideologies that have shaped it.

Needed as a school text and it was informative and easy to read.

When asked about weather related events that incur the deaths of hundreds of people, most think of hurricanes, floods, or large tornado outbreaks. Few would think that summer heat would bring on the deaths of over 700 people. Heat, in temperatures as low as 80 degrees Fahrenheit is responsible for more deaths annually than all other weather events combined. As a life-long weather enthusiast, I'd have enjoyed reading more about the atmospheric conditions that brought about the heat wave. But, that's not the author's intentions. His focus is on how a large metropolitan area can be brought to its knees by a sustained heat wave. It's also largely a story of the "haves" and the "have nots". People in poverty-stricken areas or living on a low or fixed income suffered the most. Deprived of relief from the heat in any way, some literally suffocated to death in their apartments. While a heat wave like this is almost an annual occurrence here in Oklahoma, for the residents of Chicago, it was indeed a tragic yet forgotten disaster of historical proportions.

I had to buy this for school but I really enjoyed reading the book. Well written and being non-fiction I was compelled to do more reading about the heatwave after I finished reading it. The story moves along quickly and the investigating Klinenberg really pays off. Volcanic activity, who knew! Just kidding, I won't give the story away.

Eric Klinenberg's new book "Heat Wave" gives readers a tremendous insight into the Chicago heat wave of 1995. He approaches this tragedy from several fronts. He begins with an account of what happened during the several days of stifling heat and continues with a look at the social impact of living and dying alone, why certain neighborhoods lost more people than others and exposes a city ill-prepared to handle the mounting number of deaths. Klinenberg continues with an assault on the politics of Chicago, the response of the mayor and those around him and finishes with an adept look at the media's role and response to the deaths of over 700 people. Although at times the author writes in a dry style he nonetheless portrays the Chicago heat wave as a catastrophic failure on many levels. Klinenberg gets down to the root of some socio-economic problems that beset Chicago and tells us the "whys" of their causes. Many things stood out as I read this important and often scary book, but one thing kept coming through....although heat waves are discriminating killers the solutions are there if right decisions are made at the right times, by governments and citizens alike. A sad and ironic end to "Heat Wave" is told in the form of a senior editor at The Chicago Tribune who decided to relate this tragedy from both a human and social side. As Chicago cooled down his work went on. Unfortunately, only a small part of the story was ever printed as the paper



decided that in the chill of November few readers would be interested in a story that had occurred during the blistering heat only a few months before. I highly recommend this book. It is a service to help us understand what happened during July of that year. As the author points out, this could happen again.

It was amazing that a city the size of Chicago was not better prepared to activate a disaster plan as this event unfolded. This book highlighted the fact that the elderly and poor are so vulnerable and forgotten in a large city. Anyone involved in emergency preparedness and social services should read this book.

Klinenberg does a thorough job of explaining the social causes of heat related deaths in Chicago in the 1995 disaster. And he does it in a manner that makes the book a page-turner - at least for this former Chicagoan.

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