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Blackouts in Black Communities: Latest Example of Racist Neglect



Dr. Allison Wiltz Follow 5 min read · 18 hours ago

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As sure as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, some will deny that the government response to blackouts after storms in Gary, Indiana, and Memphis, Tennessee, has anything to do with race. Despite these denials, evidence points to a pattern of discrimination. In the aftermath of natural disasters like tropical storms and hurricanes, black communities are more often impacted by downed power lines, outdated electrical grids, delayed maintenance, and faulty energy systems. The fact that thousands of Black people are suffering without access to electricity during some of the hottest summer days is the latest example of racist neglect.

While we often think of racism as something that is done to Black people, they've also been harmed due to negligence. Consider, for instance, that due to racial redlining and other discriminatory housing policies, many Black people live in low-income communities with failing infrastructure. America's legacy of racism leaves Black people more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters. The fact that Gary, Indiana, a city where approximately 76% of residents are Black, or Memphis, Tennessee, where approximately 63% of residents are Black, faced outages that lasted for days, and in some cases weeks, is not a coincidence. Neither is the slow government response to the humanitarian disaster unfolding because of these power outages.

In addition to wind damage from storms, city officials in Gary, Indiana, claim a major setback to restoring power has been trimming trees to access and fix power lines, something that, if done on a regular basis, wouldn't present a problem. In contrast, delays in Memphis, Tennessee stemmed

from selective prioritization of work orders. According to Justin J. Pearson, a member of the Tennessee House of Representatives, these are “two working-class, majority Black cities with tens of thousands of residents without power for days, bearing the brunt of the affordability crises, extreme weather events, and the strain of data centers on our electric grids.”

The slow governmental response to blackouts in black communities is a dereliction of duty, reminiscent of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. After a major hurricane devastated the Gulf Coast region in August of 2005, many Black people were left waiting on their roofs for days in the 9th Ward neighborhood in New Orleans, Louisiana. Hundreds drowned after the levee system and pumps designed to drain the floodwaters failed, and those who survived struggled to find food, clean water, and shelter. While the storm itself was natural, the racist policies that confined most Black residents in low-lying areas were not. Neither was the failing infrastructure in those communities — this was the accumulated effect of racist policies. For many, the assistance that did come was too little, too late.

Ideally, disaster relief work would help to restore communities damaged by natural disasters, but who receives assistance, when, and how much exposes racial bias. As Matt Plaus explained in an article published by the Harvard Kennedy School, “Black Americans receive less Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) relief funding on average than their white counterparts.” Without sufficient funding, their communities take much longer to recover. Part of the problem is that FEMA determines the level of financial aid needed based on the value of properties within a given area.

Due to America's legacy of racist housing policies, many Black people live in low-income communities. Still, the formulas government officials use to determine how much aid is needed fail to consider this. Without an intentional policy shift, one that considers the disparate impact of natural disasters on black communities and other marginalized groups, this cycle will repeat itself in perpetuity. Whoever said a rising tide lifts all boats knew nothing about the role race and class played in shaping the experiences of Hurricane Katrina survivors, or those of other disasters.

Black Americans are no stranger to neglect as a form of racism. After chattel slavery, a quarter of the formerly enslaved people died from starvation and diseases due to malnutrition and exposure to the elements, as the historian Jim Downs suggested in his text, Sick From Freedom. And while the Reconstruction Era, a period when the country formally abolished slavery, established birthright citizenship, and equal legal protection regardless of race, this would prove to be only a glimmer of light in an otherwise dark tunnel. Jim Crow represented a return to overt racism, characterized not just by the separation of races, but by the subordinate treatment of Black people and their communities. And while the civil rights movement ended formal segregation, it did nothing to improve living conditions in black communities or ensure infrastructure was properly maintained.

While there's a great bit of denialism in American society, as many claim that we're living in a post-racial society, where the color of someone's skin no longer matters, the truth is that the color of your skin, your race, and the race of your parents still impact your quality of life in America. This is more pronounced following natural disasters, when priorities are laid bare. Black

people today are more likely to live in communities with poor air and water quality, have less access to financial resources for disaster preparedness, and, as the blackouts in Gary, Indiana, and Memphis, Tennessee, highlight, struggle more so following natural disasters. Racist neglect deprives Black people of an opportunity to develop resilient communities that have the resources and support they need to weather a storm.

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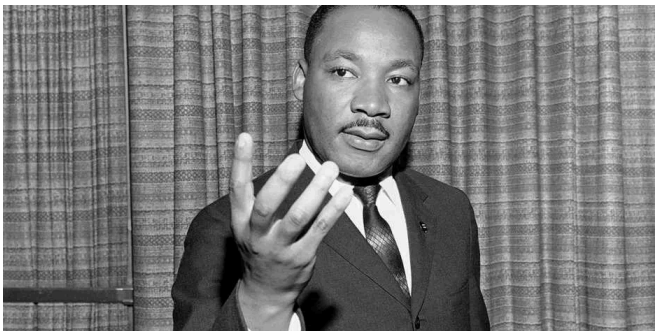


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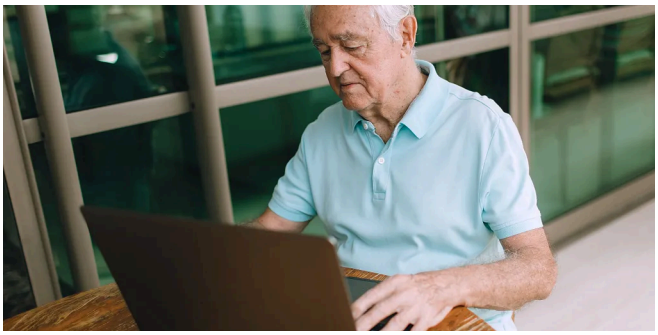
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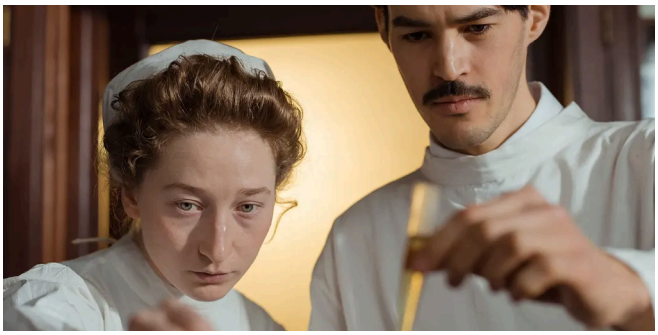
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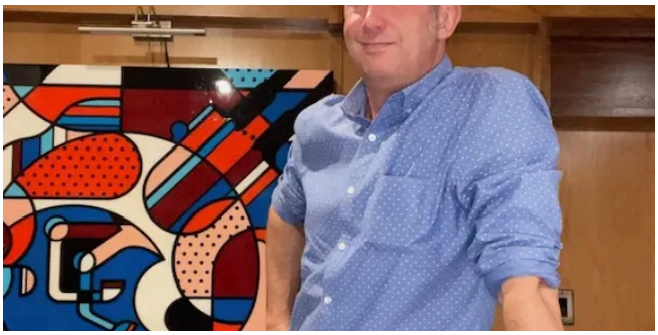


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