

## OUTLOOK

# Carbon monoxide deaths preventable

By Neil B. Hampson

The epidemic of carbon monoxide poisoning that occurred in Texas during the week of Feb. 15 was shocking, appalling and incredibly sad. It was also largely preventable.

A major winter storm resulting from an arctic air outbreak caused temperatures to fall in Texas to 30-year lows, hitting zero degrees in some parts of the state during the week. Amid freezing temperatures, as many as 3.3 million were without power or experiencing rolling blackouts. Five days later, about 180,000 homes and businesses in Texas still had no electricity.

As dwellings got colder and darker, residents turned to alternate sources of energy for heat and light. According to media reports, improper use of such things as charcoal grills, automobiles, space heaters and gasoline-powered electrical generators resulted in 600 cases of carbon monoxide poisoning in Harris County alone. The Harris County Fire Department responded to 475 carbon monoxide calls. The Texas Panhandle Poison Control Center received over 400 calls related to carbon monoxide poisoning over five days.

A number of the poisonings were fatal. A mother and her 7-year-old daughter died while sitting in their running car in the garage attempting to stay warm and charge their cellphone. A woman died while attempting to heat her home with her natural gas stove. Four men and a woman died in two incidents from carbon monoxide emitted by a generator placed too close to their home. Among the nonfatal poisonings, carbon monoxide undoubtedly resulted in brain injury with permanent cognitive damage in many.

As shocking as these events may have been to many, they are nothing new. The risks of indoor use of charcoal for heat, improper generator use for electrical power, and running a car in the garage for heat and power in a storm-related power outage have all been well described in the medical literature and publicized. The sources of carbon monoxide and poisoning following storms have been reviewed and published.

Despite these efforts to educate the public, the typical pattern continued in Texas.

Warning labels, including nonverbal pictograms to warn non-English speaking individuals, have been added to packages of charcoal sold in the U.S. and also to electrical generators. Some manufacturers of generators have developed models that produce lower amounts of carbon monoxide or shut off when ambient carbon monoxide levels rise to dangerous levels. However, short of a very expensive recall and retrofit of previously purchased models, older versions will be in use for many years.

Attempts at prevention through education appears to have helped little in Texas as poisoning incidents occurred at a rate which may have produced more episodes of carbon monoxide poisoning than any storm in U.S. history by a factor of two- to three-fold. Other states were affected by this storm and have been by prior winter storms, resulting in prolonged power outages during cold temperatures. Why was the situation in Texas so extreme?

It likely was related, at least in large part, to a lack of government regulation. Of the 50 states, only three (Hawaii, Missouri and Texas) do not require installation of carbon monoxide alarms in residences. Carbon monoxide gas is insensible to humans and is not detected by smoke alarms, which are required in all U.S. homes. People are not aware of the exposure to carbon monoxide until they become sick.

Since most poisonings in these situations occur in homes, carbon monoxide alarms have great potential for poisoning prevention. It has been estimated that as many as 50 percent of accidental residential carbon monoxide deaths can be prevented with alarms and that they will be cost-effective if only 10 percent effective. Many predict this type of storm will recur. As the second most populous state in the nation, it is time for Texas to join the rest of the country and pass legislation requiring residential CO alarms.

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## Some Trump backers now want someone else



**Marc A. Thiessen** says quite a few of the former president's most ardent loyalists believe there might be better candidates to advance his ideas.

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump's loyal base remains intensely loyal. A straw poll of participants in the 2021 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) found 97 percent approve of the job Trump did as president, including 87 percent who approve strongly, while 95 percent said the Republican Party must continue to pursue Trump's issues and agenda. "He's literally the most popular figure we have ever had in the conservative movement," said pollster Jim McLaughlin, who conducted the survey.

So it was stunning that when Trump's most fervent supporters were asked whom they would support in 2024 if Trump were running, only 55 percent said they would vote for the former president. That's a majority, but just barely. Fully 45 percent of CPAC participants — who approve of Trump and believe in his agenda — want someone else to carry the banner of Trumpism into the next election.

That is not a repudiation of the former president. It's a grudging recognition by many of his most ardent loyalists that, despite their adoration of him, there might be better candidates to advance his ideas, which remain popular with the American people even if Trump does not.

The 2020 election was a repudiation not of Trumpism, but of Trump. Pre-election polls showed that a 49 percent plurality of Americans agreed with Trump over then-candidate Joe Biden on the issues. Trump didn't lose because voters wanted higher taxes, more regulation or open borders. He lost because he drove away millions of voters who approved of his policies, but did not approve of him. They liked his economic stewardship, but didn't like the chaos of the past four years — especially during a pandemic.

Politico reports that numerous pollsters brought to brief then-Vice President Mike Pence on the election results "made clear that while there was substantial support for Trump's policies, there was widespread exhaustion with the president." That was confirmed by a detailed autopsy report from Trump's own pollster Tony Fabrizio, which found that the president lost "largely due to a massive swing" among independents and erosion among key groups that had supported him four years earlier.

In the five key swing states that flipped from Trump to Biden — Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — Trump suffered a net shift of 19 points

among independents compared with 2016. He also suffered net shifts of 12 points among white men, 14 points among college-educated whites, 6 points among working-class whites and 8 points among seniors — a group that propelled him into the White House four years earlier. Biden also held a double-digit advantage over Trump in flipped states on the question of who was more "honest and trustworthy," with the former president under water on the question by a massive 18 points.

Trump's behavior and rhetoric before the election drove away persuadable voters, and his behavior and rhetoric after the election only served to confirm their choice. To retake the White House in 2024, Republicans need to win those voters back. And a significant portion of Trump's most loyal supporters at CPAC seems to think that another standard-bearer would be best positioned to do that four years from now.

This is true outside the CPAC ballroom as well. A February CNBC poll found that 74 percent of Republicans want Trump to stay active in some way, but just 48 percent want him to remain head of the Republican Party — while 1 in 4 want him "to remove himself from politics entirely."

So who might pick up Trump's mantle? The two breakout stars of CPAC were pro-Trump governors Ron DeSantis of Florida and Kristi Noem of South Dakota, both of whom have won plaudits on the right for keeping their states open. In an open field, there will be no shortage of contenders. The only thing that seems certain at this point is that it is highly unlikely an anti-Trump Republican will win the GOP nomination.

But, of course, none of the pro-Trump alternatives will get in the race if Trump runs — which he hinted he might do in his CPAC speech. "With your help, we will take back the House, we will win the Senate, and then, a Republican president will make a triumphant return to the White House," Trump told the adoring crowd. "And I wonder who that will be. I wonder who that will be. Who, who, who will that be? I wonder." The nomination is Trump's for the taking. The only question is whether he chooses to be king or kingmaker. Trump might or might not leave the presidential stage, but Trumpism is here to stay.

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Outdoor Power Equipment Institute

**The author urges residents to use gas-powered generators with care, keeping them outdoors and away from windows and being mindful of carbon monoxide.**

## There's a way to fix Griddy's wholesale pricing model

By Michael Davis

Griddy, the Houston electricity retailer that sent those massive bills to customers after the big snowstorm, has had a bad few days. On Feb. 26, ERCOT shut them down for non payment of bills. On the following Monday, the Texas attorney general filed legal actions accusing them of things like price gouging and fraud.

Maybe Griddy is the most corrupt business since Al Capone's bootlegging empire or maybe it's just a victim of unprecedented bad weather. The lawyers can sort all that out.

But whether Griddy somehow survives or fails, we should all hope something very similar to the Griddy business model lives on.

Here's why.

The basic economics of electricity are actually not that much different than lots of other consumer goods. For many of the things we buy, most of what we're paying for is capacity. I spent \$100 for a decent coffee maker last month but I use it for about 10 minutes a day. I didn't pay \$100 for a cup of coffee, I paid for the capacity to make

coffee whenever I feel like coffee.

And so it goes. Unless you're a teenager, your bed goes unused for two-thirds of the day. Your car sits idle for hours and hours even though you are making the payments and spending money for insurance. We're not wasting money on bedrooms and garages, we're buying welcome capacity.

Electricity is no different. In Texas during a heat wave or as we now know, a record-breaking cold, we can demand over 75,000 megawatts of electricity. Other times we can get by with one-third that amount. This means that our grid needs to have tremendous capacity.

That's expensive but it's worth it.

But here's the weird and wonderful thing about electricity. The demand for capacity varies minute by minute. This means that if we can just shift demand by a few minutes, we can reduce the overall demand for capacity.

Since 2010 about 62 percent of the houses built in Texas have electric heat and as temperatures fell on that fateful Sunday night, hundreds of thousands of homeowners cranked up the heat and turned on the weather report.

Now some experts who've looked at the usage data have suggested that if everyone had just turned down their thermostats to 65 degrees before going to bed, ERCOT might have been able to handle the surging demand.

So how do we get people to shift their demand over the course of a day? Easy. We encourage people to sign up for "dynamic pricing," a system in which electric prices vary over the course of a day.

That way when they see prices go up, they'll have every incentive to conserve.

Griddy's pricing scheme was the ultimate form of dynamic pricing. As demand for capacity spiked, the wholesale prices it passed through to its customers spiked.

Paying a fixed fee for the right to buy power at wholesale prices can be a great deal provided two other things are in place.

First, there has to be an economic circuit breaker that caps the maximum charge. That means, of course, that the monthly fee will be higher but for almost every household it will be worth it.

Second — and this is critical — customers need to know what



Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

**The author says it's critical that customers know what they're paying in real time for electricity and adjust their usage.**

they're paying in real time and they have to be trained to pay attention.

Fortunately, transparency is easy. Every electricity retailer should do what many are already doing: put the current prices up on an app or some other digital display. (Between the oven, microwave and who know what else, we've got plenty of clocks in our kitchen. How cool would it be to have one that displays the

current price of power?)

Information is power — or in this case, the conservation of power.

Reform Griddy or let the angry mob drive it out of the village. But let's promote dynamic pricing.

It will help us all reduce the need for expensive capacity.

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