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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.

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Customer Reviews

What weather phenomenon kills the most people in America? Hurricanes? Tornadoes? Floods? Add those up and they will still not total the deaths attributed to the real killer: heat waves. The other phenomena yield good pictures, and that is one reason you don't hear much about heat deaths. But according to Eric Klinenberg, an assistant professor of sociology at New York University, there is another, more subtle reason. Victims of a heat wave "are primarily social outcasts - the elderly, the poor, and the isolated - from whom we customarily turn away." In *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (University of Chicago Press), Klinenberg has looked at the week-long heat wave of July 1995, which killed over 700 people. (Another comparison: the famous Chicago fire of 1871 killed about three hundred.) In Chicago, the heat hit up to 106 degrees, with a heat index over 120. Cars broke down in the streets, and bridges, rails, and roads buckled. Even with the windows open, brick homes could heat up to 120 degrees. The heat killed, but it did not just kill randomly. In clear, objective, but often biting pages, Klinenberg shows the patterns of urban life that brought death to certain regions and certain social groups. One group was the elderly, clearly disproportionately killed by the heat. This might be attributed simply to their bodies having fewer physiological resources to protect them. Indeed, the government of Chicago tried to explain the deaths of elders this way; the heat only culled those who were going to be dying soon anyway. There is no medical evidence that this was the case; they simply were unconnected with society, and when they died alone in their rooms, it was long before absences were noticed.

It is almost impossible to believe that one heat wave could kill over 700 people in the city of Chicago. But that is exactly what happened in the heat wave of July 1995. And it is even more staggering to think that the city did not want to realize the severity of this disaster and tried to pass it off in a number of ways - although given the nature of politics, perhaps this is not so surprising. In "Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago" Eric Klinenberg thoroughly examines the heat wave and its aftermath and raises questions about social disparity that are impossible to ignore. In July of 1995 the city of Chicago did not have an emergency plan in place for instances of natural disaster such as the one that befell the city that month. In fact, the negligible plans that they did have in place were incapable of dealing with the disaster. As the heat soared above 110 degrees, people were dying left and right and emergency responses were overloaded and unable to respond. Bodies piled up outside the morgue, with refrigerated trucks being called in to handle the vast number of corpses that arrived daily. The vast majority of these deaths were elderly people, poor people, people who were isolated and live on their own, those who did not have the resources to afford air conditioning or had no one who would check up on them. This speaks more to the social disparity that exists in Chicago than it does to personal preferences. This city full of multimillion dollar highrises has millions of inhabitants who live in poverty, in run down housing, in neglected or moved out of parts of the city. These are neighborhoods where elderly residents are afraid to leave their houses past certain times or even at all, out of fear of the gangs and drugs and violence on their streets.

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