

Disabled Power

Disability, Infrastructure Failure, and Survival During Winter Storm Uri

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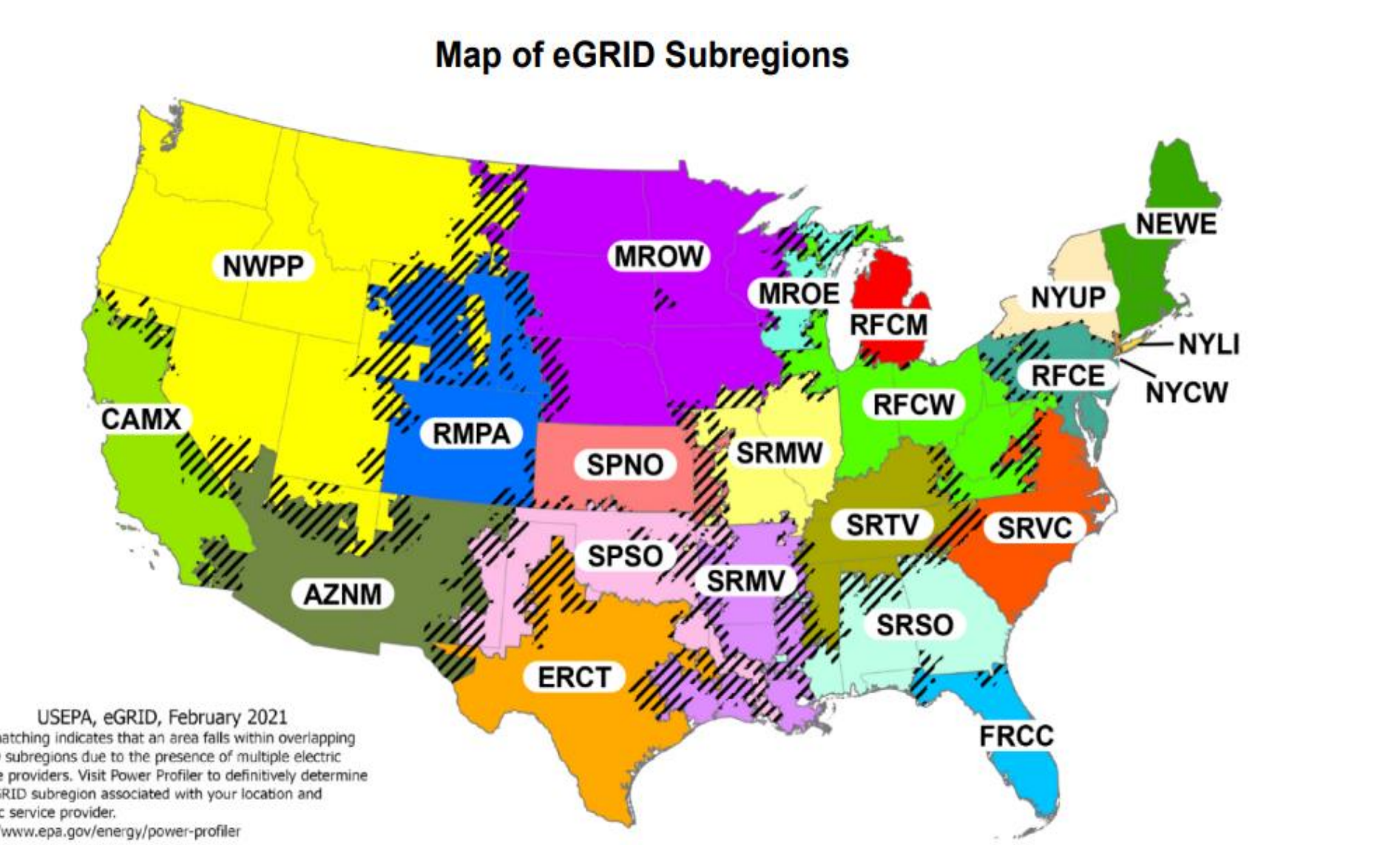
Winter Storm Uri (February 2021)

- Arctic temperatures, snow, and ice across Texas
- Texas's independent power grid pushed toward collapse
- ERCOT ordered rotating outages to prevent catastrophic grid failure (Douglas 2021)
- Outages lasted days for many residents (Energy Institute 2021)
- Indoor temperatures dropped to dangerous levels (Stipes 2021)

Cascading infrastructure failures:

- Water system breakdowns
- Burst pipes (Glazer et al. 2021)
- Compromised hospitals and emergency services (Busby et al. 2021)

Occurred during peak COVID-19 pandemic



Research Questions

1. How did Texans with disabilities uniquely experience Winter Storm Uri?
2. How did infrastructure failure produce disability vulnerability?
3. How did disabled Texans exercise resilience and care during crisis?

Methods

- 57 in-depth interviews with Texans with disabilities
- 20 interviews with government officials and advocates
- Qualitative analysis of lived experience during infrastructure collapse

- Infrastructure is not neutral — it distributes harm unequally.
- Disability vulnerability is policy-produced.
- Care networks function as critical survival infrastructure.
- Disaster planning routinely marginalizes disabled communities.
- Emergency systems remain designed for nondisabled norms.

Official death toll: 246
Estimated excess deaths: ~800

Core Argument 1: Vulnerability Is Produced — Not Inherent

The harms disabled Texans experienced were not inevitable consequences of individual impairments.

Rather, vulnerability was produced through policy decisions that:

- Disabled power systems
- Disabled water systems
- Disabled emergency response infrastructure

When infrastructure failed, it created unique physical and emotional harms for people dependent on:

- Medical devices
- Temperature regulation
- Mobility supports
- Home-based care
- Accessible communication systems

Infrastructure failure “disabled” the state.

Deadliest disaster in modern Texas history
Deadliest bulk power failure in U.S. history

Core Argument 2: Disabled Power as Resilience

The term *Disabled Power* has a second meaning: It names the individual and collective resilience of disabled Texans. Contrary to dominant disaster narratives portraying disabled people as passive victims:

Disabled Texans:

- Developed creative survival strategies
- Shared resources and knowledge
- Coordinated care networks
- Provided mutual aid within disability communities

However, this resilience often required:

- Physical sacrifice
- Emotional labor
- Invisible forms of endurance

Climate disasters are disability disasters.

“I was scared I was going to lose my feet. That’s how purple they were.”— Will, 29, Houston, TX

During Winter Storm Uri, Will and his family lost power for three days, followed by two days of rolling blackouts. Indoor temperatures fell into the 30s. With limited mobility due to physical disabilities, Will could not maintain circulation in his feet. As water from a burst pipe poured through their ceiling, his greatest fear was amputation from freezing temperatures — inside his own home.



Broader Significance

Disabled people globally are 2–4x more likely to die in disasters (UNISDR 2014).

In the U.S., disabled people are the demographic group least likely to return home one year after evacuation (U.S. Census Bureau 2023).

Despite this, disability remains underrepresented in:

- Disaster studies
- Environmental sociology
- Climate adaptation research

Centering disability reshapes how we understand vulnerability and resilience.

Contributions

Theoretical

- Reframes vulnerability as infrastructure-produced
- Expands environmental sociology through disability analysis
- Reconceptualizes resilience through disability justice
- Empirical
- One of the largest qualitative studies of disabled disaster experience in the U.S.

Practical

- Blueprint for equitable emergency planning
- Disability-centered disaster policy recommendations