IDEAS
FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY
OCCASIONAL PAPERS FROM OSI-U.S. PROGRAMS

Murder *by* PUBLIC POLICY

BY ERIC KLINENBERG

In July 1995, more than 700 Chicago residents died and thousands more became seriously ill during a short heat wave. Most of the victims died alone, and hundreds were discovered behind locked doors and closed windows, often hours or days after they perished. History will record them as human casualties of a natural disaster. But meteorologists and health scholars claim that their most sophisticated weather models fail to account for the scale of the city's catastrophe; though more Americans die in heat waves than in all other environmental disasters combined, there is nothing natural about the way the victims lived or died. My book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, explores the social and political conditions that made the week so much more treacherous than it should have been. But my research also addresses a deeper and more difficult question. What conditions make the disaster and its several hundred victims so easy to ignore and forget? Why did the great Chicago heat wave fail to register as a significant and memorable trauma, even in the city where it took place?

One reason that the heat wave has been so insignificant is that most of the victims were people who are always out of sight in American cities: the poor, the elderly, and the isolated inhabitants of violent, depleted neighborhoods and run-down, single room occupancy hotels. American political culture is predicated on a will not to know about the severe deprivation and suffering that are features of everyday life in the places that proved so lethal during the heat wave. During the booming 1990s, when Chicago beautified its downtown glamour zones, built up its tourist attractions, and boasted of its renaissance, the city had little interest in pausing to consider the fate of people left behind.

But it is surprising that political officials and leading news organizations actively encouraged citizens to deny or downplay the severity of the catastrophe. Mayor Richard M. Daley, for example, responded to the medical examiner's autopsy reports by publicly challenging the scientific credibility of his findings and advising the public not to "blow it out of proportion." (Contrast this to the way political leaders respond to extreme weather events that damage property rather than people. They are lightning-quick to declare an official emergency and secure federal disaster support.) *The Chicago Tribune* drastically cut its investigation into the lives and deaths of the heat wave victims because the reporting ended in the fall, and editors believed that readers would not be interested in what they considered a "summer story." The Chicago City Council refused

HEAT WAVE

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to hold hearings to examine whether government agencies responded adequately and determine why so many residents were vulnerable. The *Tribune* buried reporting on the council's decision in the inside pages, under the headline: "Rambunctious Aldermen Sideline Dog Law, Heat Wave Probe." Few people noticed.

Chicago leaders decided that its disaster evaluation would be an internal affair. The Office of the Mayor appointed a number of hand-chosen local leaders to serve on its own "commission on extreme weather conditions." The commission, which included social service administrators, health officials, and a gerontologist, was charged with uncovering "the epidemiological, meteorological, and sociological aspects of the heat wave." But the mayor did not invite any sociologists to participate in the investigation. When the commission issued a report on their findings, the executive summary said the heat wave was a "unique meteorological event," rather than a predictable danger for which the city already had an emergency plan, albeit one it neglected to use. The commission reports that "nearly all community areas were affected" by the disaster, which is akin to saying all neighborhoods are affected by crime. It discovered — though how is unclear — that "those most at risk may be least likely to want or accept help from government," a finding that supported the human services commissioner's claim that, "we're talking about people who die because they neglect themselves." The lessons for policy? "Government cannot be held responsible for the heat," and "government alone cannot do it all." Of course no one ever argued otherwise.

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Journalists, citizens, health officials, and political leaders interested in learning helpful policy approaches based on Chicago's experience could be excused if they failed to notice the report. It was designed to go unnoticed, to hide the tragedy while pretending to make it public. The report cover says it all. Its title, "Mayor's Commission on Extreme Weather Conditions," makes no reference to the heat wave or the heat-related deaths that are the subject of the study. Above the text, inexplicably, is an image of a snowflake. Here the will not to show works in the service of the will not to know.

It turns out that the local government had good reason to bury the story. Chicago did little to protect vulnerable citizens during the crisis and ignoring its own heat wave response plan was just the beginning. The fire department refused to dispatch additional ambulances or personnel even though paramedics in the field were behind schedule and their supervisors requested backup. Emergency medical workers could not meet their own standards for responding to service calls; and in many cases they developed their own heat-related illnesses from overwork. One deputy chief paramedic accused the city of committing "murder by public policy" and resigned his rank. The police department neglected to activate its special units designed to serve the elderly, and its community policing programs for providing special services proved ineffective when they could have made a difference. The health department had no system to coordinate emergency healthcare, and nearly half the local hospitals refused to accept new patients. Many heat victims were carried for miles in ambulances searching for an open hospital bed, even though heat illness requires immediate medical attention to prevent permanently debilitating injuries or death. According to one former official in the health department, the Office of the Mayor demanded that his department refrain from publicly acknowledg-

ing the death figures that the medical examiner was reporting. The consequence, he argues, is that the city never centralized its response systems and triggered the emergency health and social protection systems it had in place. Yet the city had no trouble mounting a centralized public relations response; city commissioners appeared together in press conferences, where the health commissioner declared that, "We acted in an emergency alert. Get that straight. We did it all."

Chicago's response to *Heat Wave* has been consistent with its previous practices. While officials in the federal government and other local agencies contacted me to discuss the implications of the book's findings—for heat waves, urban disasters, and the problems of isolation and deprivation more generally—Chicago leaders refused to meet with me. City administrators turned down several invitations to discuss the policy issues related to the heat wave—in the media, with foundation officers, in public events, or in private meetings.

In fact, the only response from the city government came in a totally unexpected forum: *The New England Journal of Medicine*, which, in clear disregard for conflict of interest concerns, invited John Wilhelm, Chicago's current health commissioner and the deputy commissioner in charge of the city's heat response in 1995, to write a scientific review of the book. Wilhelm made good use of the invitation, transforming the world's leading health science journal into an outlet for continued denial. More disturbingly, he questions the book's reporting of the racial disparities in heat-related

Frank Cezus/Getty Images

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mortality. Given the age distribution of Chicago's population, African Americans were almost two times more likely than whites to die in the heat wave. It is surely true that, as Wilhelm puts it, "many do not see race as the risk factor [Klinenberg] claims it is." They might refuse to recognize that extreme segregation and concentrated poverty compromises the health of many Chicago African Americans and leaves them especially vulnerable to hazards such as the heat. But they are wrong, and *Heat Wave* is just one of thousands of studies that shows this. It is unsettling to see the Chicago health commissioner question the vulnerability of the city's impoverished African American population—especially in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. One can only speculate about how this skepticism translates into policy, how the practice of transforming any space for public inquiry into a place for public relations affects what we know, and cannot know, about the urban condition today.

After the heat wave of 1995, Chicago became a national leader in designing emergency heat wave response plans. On dangerously hot days, the city opens a hotline that Chicagoans can call if they need special assistance, conducts telephone outreaches and—if necessary—home visits to isolated people it has identified, provides special transportation to public cooling centers, and monitors the intake at city hospitals to detect health patterns.

Yet several of the underlying policy programs that made Chicago residents vulnerable during the heat wave remain below the radar screen — and this is why another 114 city residents died in a less severe heat wave in 1999. Chicago has done little to address the housing crisis for poor seniors, many of whom experience extreme insecurity and dangerous local social environments as everyday norms. The city's new strategy of managing agencies like businesses (several department heads are now called CEOs, not commissioners) and treating citizens like consumers has produced several dangerous conditions. Many of the poor elderly urban residents I got to know during my fieldwork lacked running water in their homes because the city had shut off the taps when they fell behind on payments. One woman fighting breast cancer while raising her young grandchild was able to survive only because neighbors regularly brought buckets of water to her home. When the woman's medical doctor wrote the city and I called the water department to ask for help given the dire situation, the official in charge of shutoff cases replied, "I get requests like that all the time. Constantly. I've got people coming to me everyday with stories like that. So what am I supposed to do?" He and the department interpreted the prevalence of shutoffs among the elderly poor as a symptom of failed consumer responsibility, rather than as sign of failed policy. Chicago and other American cities take little notice of the everyday energy crisis affecting millions of urban residents, who must balance the costs of heating and eating in winter, and cannot afford artificial cooling in summer. On average, low-income families in Illinois pay about 35 percent of their monthly income on utilities during winter, compared to 6 percent for the rest of the population. Yet the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which subsidizes energy costs for the poor and is already woefully inadequate to meet demand, is regularly at the top of Republicans' policy hit list. Indeed, during the week of July 17, 1995, as Chicago was still counting its heat deaths, the United States Senate initiated a vote to end LIHEAP altogether and ultimately settled on a compromise that cut 10 percent from the budget. Soon after, the United States House of Representatives made an even more aggressive push to eliminate LIHEAP. Most news outlets made no connection between the urban disaster and the policy debate about energy for the poor.

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The story of the 1995 heat wave is important because it reveals social conditions — the emergence of isolated seniors and the devastation of abandoned places — and political practices, such as those described here, that are always present but difficult to perceive. Chicago is famous as a city of extremes, and the heat wave was one of its most dramatic moments. But how many smaller-scale disasters or emergencies in slow motion are taking place, right now, in other American cities? Who will report on them? How will we know?

Eric Klinenberg is a professor of sociology at New York University and an OSI Individual Project Fellow. *Heat Wave* garnered several awards — including Best Book in Sociology and Anthropology for 2002 from the Association of American Publishers, Best Book for 2001-2 from the Urban Affairs Association, and the Mira Komarovsky Book Prize — and was a Chicago Tribune Favorite Book Selection for 2002.

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The city of extremes

The following is an excerpt from Eric Klinenberg's Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago.

Thursday, 14 July 1995, was the hottest day in Chicago's recorded history, but the weather is only one of the reasons that Joseph Laczko died alone in his home soon afterward. Laczko, a sixty-eight-year-old man of Hungarian descent, lived by himself in an apartment on the city's Northwest Side. Although he had few visitors, Laczko apparently staved off loneliness by collecting his neighbors' unwanted mail and filling his home with phone books, old newspapers, and shoddy furniture. Laczko preserved order amidst the chaos of broken radios and piled seat cushions by keeping a calendar, in which he recorded the daily temperature and noted the news stories that moved him. On 15 July he entered "94 degrees" in the book. On 16 July he was dead.

Aside from the calendar, investigators from the Office of the Cook County Public Administrator who searched Laczko's home for contact information about friends or family found only a few signs of a social life. Laczko kept a couple of letters sent to him from Hungary in the 1980s; a bank statement showing that his last withdrawal on 1 July, brought his account down to less than a thousand dollars; a group of letters from legal cases in which he had been involved in the 1980s and early 1990s; and an Easter card he had written in 1991 but never sent. Most of Laczko's papers were taken to the Public Administrators Office, and the staff would later use them in their efforts to track down someone interested in claiming his possessions.

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In their report, the investigators listed the results of their inquiry: "Unfurnished one bedroom apartment. Complete mess. . . . Living room: 4 chairs, 2 stereos, 2 stools, boxes, misc papers, junk, garbage. Bedroom: wardrobe, 1 single bed, 3 dressers, misc clothing, papers, garbage. Dining room: 1 dresser, 1 film projector, 1 table, garbage. Family: 0." They took two instant photographs, consulted with Laczko's landlord, and left for their next job. "There was so much to do that we lost all idea of time," an investigator on Laczko's case remembered. "We'd hit the streets and we just kept going until nightfall. We were so crushed that we had to write our reports from the field." It was the busiest week ever experienced by the Public Administrators Office, which is in charge of managing the estates of unclaimed decedents. Dozens of cases that would be similar to Laczko's remained.

Cook County officials brought Laczko's corpse to the morgue, where the intake staff of pathologists assembled by Chief Medical Examiner Edmund Donoghue was racing to keep up with the demand. After examining the body, pathologists determined that Laczko had died of artherosclerotic cardiovascular disease and heat stress. They penned these findings on his death certificate, entered his records into a computer database, and moved his cadaver into storage. The office waited for Laczko's next of kin to take care of his remains, but no one ever came. When it was clear that the body would never be claimed, the Public Administrators Office used funds from Laczko's bank account to have a private funeral home arrange for his interment in a cemetery nearby.

Solitary at the end of life, Laczko was joined by hundreds of other Chicago residents who died alone during the heat wave and were assist-

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ed by two potentially life-saving interventions — attention from state-sponsored service providers and artificial cooling — only after their bodies were delivered to the Cook County Morgue. Just a minority of the victims, including a mother and child who succumbed together and two sisters who lived in the same building, perished with company nearby. Hundreds died alone behind locked doors and sealed windows that entombed them in suffocating private spaces where visitors came infrequently and the air was heavy and still. Among these victims, the bodies and belongings of roughly 170 people went unclaimed until the Public Administrators Office initiated an aggressive campaign to seek out relatives who had not noticed that a member of their family was missing. Even then, roughly one-third of the cases never moved beyond the public agency. The personal possessions of dozens of the heat wave victims, including Laczko, remain filed in cardboard boxes at the County Building to this day.

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