

Survey of Household Energy Insecurity in Time of COVID
Preliminary Results of Wave-2, and Wave-1 and Wave-2 Combined
March 4, 2021

(Note: this report updates a previous report issued on September 22, 2020)

Energy Insecurity in the United States

Energy insecurity is a widespread problem among low-income households in the U.S. When families, especially those with young children or disabled household members, are unable to meet their energy demands, their mental and physical wellbeing is likely to suffer. This is particularly true under conditions of extreme weather like heat waves, which are increasing due to climate change.

Now, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge for vulnerable populations. Early in the pandemic, several federal, state, and local government protections were put in place to protect low-income Americans from facing economic hardship and energy insecurity, including eviction and utility disconnection moratoriums. Many of these protections expired over the summer, during the hottest months of the year. This pushed more families into uncertainty and insecurity. These shocks will continue to strain the ability of low-income households to afford their basic expenses and keep on top of debt burdens. In addition, as families continue to stay home because of the pandemic, they will need to power their energy sources, including air conditioning, refrigeration, cooking, online learning devices, and medical devices. This increased energy burden will exacerbate insecurity and leave low-income families vulnerable to decreased health, debt accumulation, and eviction.

The Survey of Household Energy Insecurity in Time of COVID

The survey was administered to a nationally-representative sample of those households at or below 200% of the federal poverty line (FPL). The survey is the second wave of a four-wave panel (Wave-1 of the panel had 2,381 respondents and was administered from April 30 to May 25). The survey was administered online from August 4 through August 20 on behalf of an Indiana University research team, by YouGov, a private polling and market research firm. The survey was taken by 2,247 respondents, and includes questions about energy expenses, household energy behavior, and activities since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to the survey have a margin of error of about 2%.

Summary of Key Findings

From May through August (Wave-1 and Wave-2 data combined):

- 21% of respondents indicated that they could not pay their energy bill, nearly 15% received a shutoff notice, and 6% had their service disconnected. These findings suggest that 3.8 million Americans could not pay an energy bill in at least one month since May, 2.8 million received a shutoff notice, and 1.2 million had their electricity disconnected.

- Approximately 27% of Black and 32% of Hispanic respondents could not pay their energy bill since May. In addition, about 17% of Black respondents and 30% of Hispanics reported receiving a disconnection notice. Approximately 7% of Black respondents went on to be disconnected, and the same was true for over 17% of Hispanic households.
- Blacks and Hispanic households were far more likely than white households to become newly insecure over the summer months across each of the measures.
- Only 41% of respondents reported having received a COVID stimulus check (part of the CARES act). Only about a third of African American and Hispanic households received their checks.

Within the summer months (June, July, and August):

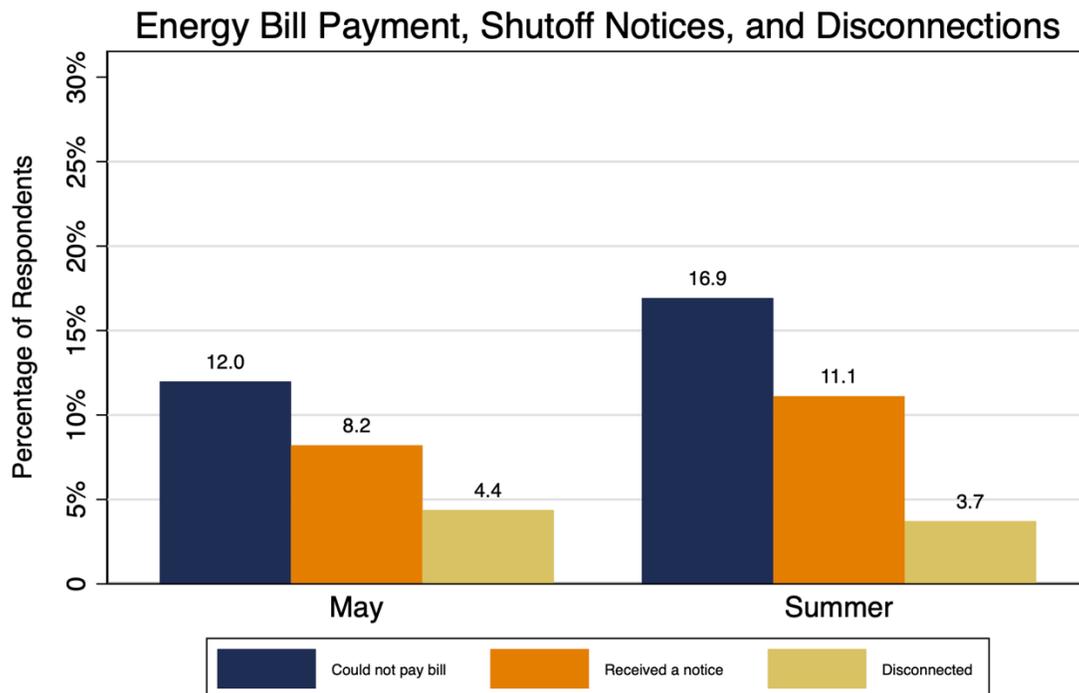
- 17% indicated that they could not pay an energy bill during these three months, 11% received a shutoff notice, and 4% had their service disconnected.
- 19% indicated that they had to reduce or forgo expenses for basic household needs, such as medicine or food, to pay an energy bill. About 30% said the pandemic harmed their ability to obtain medical care.
- 20% of Black and 27% of Hispanic households could not pay an energy bill during the last three months, compared to 12% of low-income white households.
- During the prior three months, compared to low-income white households, 2 times as many low-income Black households and 5 times as many low-income Hispanic households received a disconnection notice. Similarly, compared to white households, 5 times as many Black households and 8 times as many Hispanic households reported having their electricity shut off due to nonpayment.
- 22% of households with income at or below the poverty line did not pay their energy bill during the last three months, compared to 18% of households with income between 100-150% FPL, and 10% of households with income between 150-200% FPL. In addition, households at or below 100% FPL were approximately 3 times more likely (compared to households between 150-200% FPL) to both receive a disconnection notice and go on to be disconnected.
- Households with children under 5 years of age, households with someone requiring use of an electronic medical device, households where someone either lost their job or had their hours reduced since the COVID-19 pandemic, and households that did not receive a COVID stimulus check all experience more energy insecurity over the past three months.
- 27% of survey respondents reported having some utility debt, with 19% owing their utility company \$100 or more.
- About a quarter of respondents indicated that, since June – as a result of the pandemic – they had lost their jobs (8%), had their hours reduced (10%), or were furloughed without pay (5%). An additional 2% were furloughed with pay and about 3% noted that they had opted not to work at all.

- 7% of respondents were evicted from their homes.
- Approximately 4% of respondents lost their health insurance since June and another 3% had their health insurance benefits reduced. Another 24% of the respondents did not previously have insurance.
- Since June, approximately 13% of respondents said they were behind on their rent payments, 8% were behind on their student loans, over 13% reported being behind on their medical payments, and an additional 20% were behind on their credit card.

Detailed Results

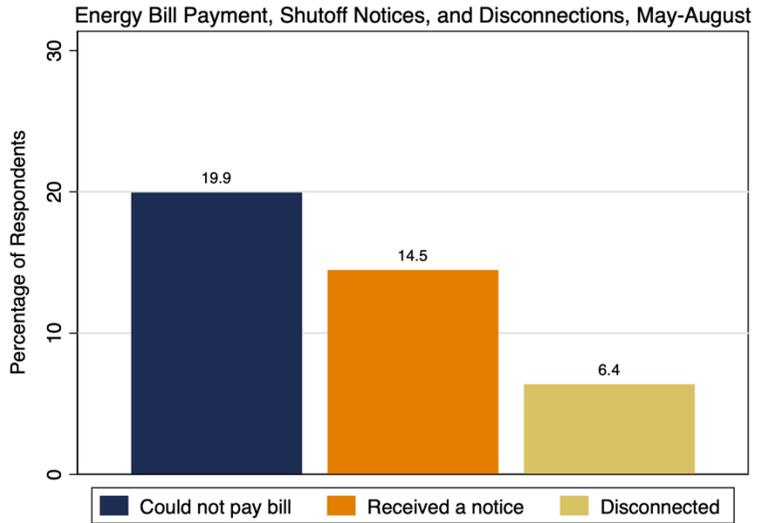
Energy bill payment, shutoff notices, and disconnections during Wave 1 and Wave 2 of survey

The percentage of low-income households unable to pay an energy bill increased from May to the summer months (though note, this is comparing one month to three months). The percentage of households receiving a shutoff notice increased slightly, while the percentage having their electricity disconnected remained about the same.



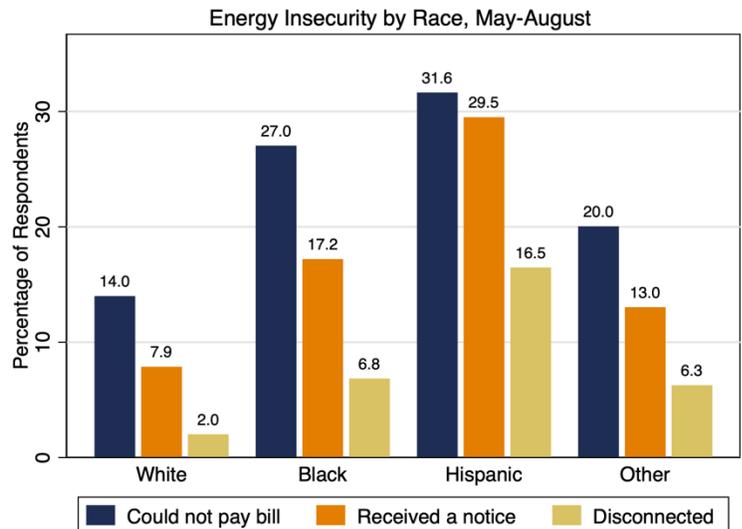
Energy bill payment, shutoff notices, and disconnections

The survey asked respondents about their ability to pay their energy bill, as well as whether they had received a shutoff notice and/or had been disconnected from service. From May-August, about 20% of respondents indicated that they could not pay an energy bill during the prior month, 15% received a shutoff notice, and over 6% had their service disconnected.



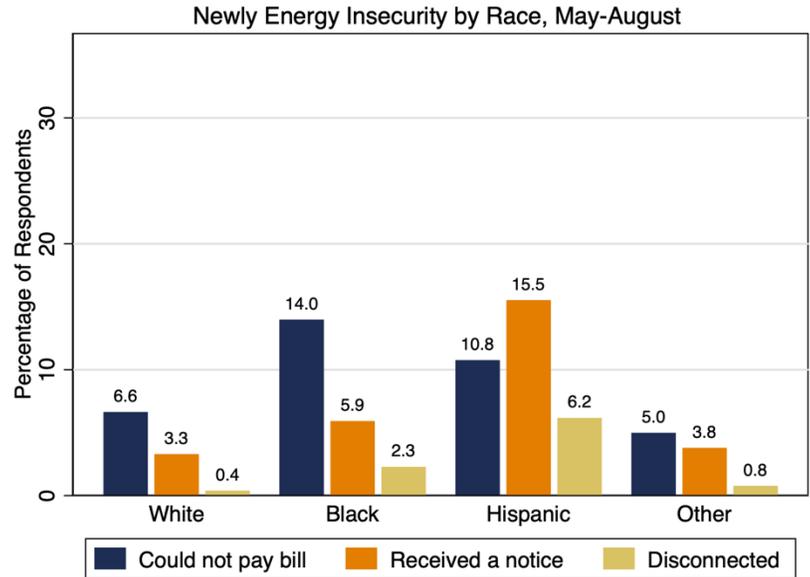
Energy bill payment, shutoff notices, and disconnections, by race

From May-August approximately 27% of Black and 32% Hispanic respondents could not pay their energy bill. In addition, 17% of Black respondents and nearly 30% of Hispanics reported receiving a disconnection notice, and 7% of Black and 17% of Hispanic respondents reported that their electricity service was disconnected.



Newly energy insecure households

We combine responses from Wave-1 and Wave-2 to measure changes in energy insecurity from May to the summer months. Of our survey population, Blacks and Hispanics were far more likely to become newly insecure over the summer months across each of the measures.



About the Research Team

This study was conducted by a [research team](#) at the O’Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, led by principal investigators David Konisky and Sanya Carley. The team studies energy justice issues that relate to the ongoing energy transition in the U.S. and across the world. This research effort was supported by grants provided by the National Science Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Indiana University’s Office of the Vice President of Research, and Indiana University’s Environmental Resilience Institute. The lead authors can be contacted at dkonisky@indiana.edu and scarley@indiana.edu.