

High utility bills strain more than the budget

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(HealthDay)—High utility bills can be more than a budget-buster. They also can cause anxiety and depression in low-income families, a new study finds.

The study included 72 families in the Boston area with annual incomes of \$32,000 or less and utility costs that were as much as \$650 a month at the height of winter.

Utility bills "at \$200 per month represent nearly 30 percent of household income for those at or near the [federal poverty level](#), making it a significant, and likely unaffordable, expense," said study author Diana Hernandez.

"While participants often expressed an ethos of responsibly 'paying the bills,' many simply cannot afford the monthly utility payments and were often 'playing catch-up' in a vicious economic cycle of prioritization and trade-offs, complicating the already fragile financial profiles of low-income ratepayers," she said.

Hernandez is an assistant professor of sociomedical sciences at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in New York City.

The inability to pay [utility bills](#) caused [mental health problems](#) such as anxiety and depression, the study found. Also, the constant threat of getting services turned off due to nonpayment would lead to fear and stigma, Hernandez said in a university news release.

Parents also felt judged by [child protective services](#) and feared losing their children, according to the study published online recently in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*.

Some families moved when their utilities were turned off.

"However, this coping strategy brings with it negative consequences," Hernandez said, as the moving families would lose important social networks and institutional ties in the neighborhood.

More information: The Center for Poverty Research at the University of California, Davis, has more on [poverty](#).

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