

# Energy insecure New Yorkers face multiple health risks

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Nearly one-third of Washington Heights residents surveyed report problems with lack of heat in the winter and/or paying their electric bills. The study by researchers at Columbia Mailman School of Public Health found these energy insecure New Yorkers were more likely to have breathing problems, mental health issues, and poor sleep.

Researchers analyzed data collected as part of the Washington Heights Community Survey conducted at the behest of NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital. The telephone-based survey of 2,494 households in English and Spanish in 2015 focused on socio-demographic characteristics, healthcare access, [health](#) risk behaviors, and current health status and medical conditions.

More than a quarter of respondents lived in [energy](#) insecure households with nearly 14 percent of their households meeting criteria for severe energy [insecurity](#) and nearly 13 percent meeting the criteria for moderate energy insecurity. Energy insecure households were more likely to have children under 18 years of age in residence and have a lower household income than energy secure households. Both black and Latino households had more than twice the odds of being threatened with energy shut-off for not paying bills after controlling for income compared to white households. Long-term "pre-gentrification" neighborhood residents were more likely to be energy insecure than recent arrivals.

Compared to energy secure households, severely energy insecure

households had twice the odds of lifetime asthma, and nearly five times the odds of pneumonia in the past year. Similarly, the odds of depression for severely energy insecure households was nearly twice that of severely energy insecure households. The odds of poor-quality sleep for severely energy insecure households was 60 percent greater than energy secure households.

One in four higher-income respondents also reported experiencing energy insecurity. Periodic building-wide heat shutoffs are not uncommon for middle-class New Yorkers, particularly those living in older buildings, the researchers explain. In this context, solutions to energy insecurity should guard against the unintended consequences of energy efficiency upgrades that act to heighten housing disparities and fuel "green gentrification."

"Community-based energy programs that help low- and middle-income make their homes more energy efficient are badly needed, across New York City and nationwide," says Diana Hernández, Ph.D., lead author and associate professor of Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia Public Health. "Because households with children are particularly at risk for energy insecurity, energy efficiency and energy assistance programs should be supplemented by referrals to food-related aid such as free or reduced meals at schools to reduce the 'heat or eat' dilemma."

The paper is titled "Energy Insecurity and Its Ill Health Effects: A Community Perspective on the Energy-Health Nexus in New York City" and appears in the journal *Energy Research & Social Science*.

**More information:** Diana Hernández et al, Energy insecurity and its ill health effects: A community perspective on the energy-health nexus in New York City, *Energy Research & Social Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.erss.2018.08.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.08.011)

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