

Nashville's ice storm wasn't unprecedented, it was predictable

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As the ice storm approached Nashville, familiar patterns set in: empty grocery shelves, last-minute supply runs, and widespread uncertainty about how severe conditions might become. This time, however, officials and media outlets urged residents to prepare for prolonged power outages – advice that many followed without knowing whether the city's infrastructure could withstand the storm itself.

Governor Bill Lee declared a state of emergency ahead of the storm, encouraging Tennesseans to stock up on supplies, medications, and pet food – a level of early warning notably absent when Hurricane Helene flooded East Tennessee recently. When ice began accumulating across the city, trees “exploded” under the weight, power lines fell, and roads became impassable. What Tennesseans expected to be another winter weather disruption quickly escalated into a prolonged emergency affecting hundreds of thousands.

Capitalism's failure: outage, exposure, and improvisation

At the height of the storm, more than 230,000 Nashville Electric Service (NES) customers lost power simultaneously. In many neighborhoods, outages lasted for days, with restoration now extending into February. Those timelines are now threatened by wind advisories, according to NES.

Businesses across large parts of the city closed – including grocery stores, gas stations, and pharmacies – lifting access to food, fuel, and medication. Untreated roads, fallen trees, and power lines further restricted mobility, particularly for seniors, disabled residents, and those without reliable transportation.

As temperatures dropped into the teens and single digits, residents were forced to improvise. Many charged phones and warmed up in cars, relied on fireplaces or space heaters, or pooled supplies with neighbors. Makeshift warming stations emerged across the city – hosted by police stations, fire stations,



churches, and local businesses – filling gaps left by an overwhelmed official response.

Hospitals across the region reported spikes in carbon monoxide poisoning linked to unsafe heating methods. According to the most recent state and local reporting, at least 25 Tennesseans have died following the storm; officials warning the number could rise.

That reality is still unfolding on the ground. Maryanna, who spent hours door-knocking with community organizers in South Nashville, described families relying on unsafe stopgap measures to survive the cold.

“We talked to families relying on space heaters, outdoor grills, and their cars for warmth and power,” she said. “I met a family with a young daughter who had been without power for seven days, relying on one space heater and an outside grill.”

For many, what stood out was not just the severity of the storm, but the absence of visible surge response.

“We knew that there would be power issues and there wasn’t a

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train of trucks on its way – because usually when I would head down to event, I would be in a caravan of power company trucks,” said Greg Snow, who told attendees at a town hall that he spent 15 years responding to disasters.

At a public meeting, Emily Anspach, a Nashville resident addressing the NES board, rejected the framing of the storm as unavoidable.

“This disaster is not a surprise. It is not unprecedented,” she said. *“It is the result of poor decision-making and the choice to place money over people.”*

Whether described as miscommunication or policy, the effect was the same: labor capacity became contested while residents remained without heat – and accountability shifted upward rather than outward.

Militarization instead of a people-centered response

As the crisis deepened, state officials deployed members of the Tennessee National Guard to Nashville to assist with logistics, wellness checks, and coordination. While Guard activations are not uncommon during large-scale emergencies, the speed and visibility of this deployment stood out to many longtime residents.

During the 2010 Nashville flood, the 2020 tornado, and Hurricane Helene – all of which caused widespread destruction and loss of life – Guard members were not visibly deployed across residential neighborhoods in the same way. This time, military presence appeared within days of the first major outages, even as power restoration lagged and civilian labor capacity remained contested.

That contrast is particularly striking in a city already deeply embedded in the military-industrial complex – economically, politically, and culturally. Nashville is home to major defense contractors, logistics firms, and federal facilities, and its political leadership has increasingly turned to military or quasi-military solutions to address civilian crises.

In recent months, the National Guard has also been requested in Memphis under different pretexts: Governor Bill Lee assistance

amid public safety concerns, while Congressman Andy Ogles publicly called for Guard deployment in Nashville in response to protests and unrest. Though distinct from the ice storm, these episodes reflect a broader pattern in which military force is positioned as a flexible tool for managing social, infrastructural, and political instability.

Against that backdrop, the Guard’s deployment in Nashville raises a deeper question: why a predictable winter storm – forecast days in advance – triggered a rapid escalation to military support while investments in civilian infrastructure, workforce capacity, and union labor were insufficient or disputed. Rather than signaling preparedness, the Guard’s presence functioned as a stopgap – compensating for failures in infrastructure maintenance, labor planning, and transparent coordination.

The concern is not the Guard itself, nor the individuals serving in uniform. It is what repeated reliance on military deployment risks normalizing: a model of governance in which militarization fills gaps left by chronic underinvestment in public utilities and workers, and where emergency response increasingly defaults to force and optics rather than durable, people-centered solutions.

In a city where military infrastructure is already deeply woven into daily life, the danger is not that these responses are exceptional – but that they are becoming routine.

A pattern, not an anomaly

For many Nashville residents, the ice storm feels less like an unprecedented crisis and more like a familiar failure. The 2010 flood, the 2020 tornado, Hurricane Helene, and other weather emergencies have each exposed similar gaps in infrastructure resilience, emergency communication, and long-term planning.

In each case, officials emphasized the “extraordinary nature of the event”. In each case, residents – particularly those in working-class Black, brown, and Latine communities – bore the brunt of prolonged recovery efforts. To this day – years and decades later – community members still feel the effect of such events.

As climate volatility increases and extreme weather events become more frequent, Nashville’s ability to respond effectively is no longer an abstract concern. The question is not whether another storm will arrive, but whether the city will address the

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systemic weaknesses repeatedly laid bare when it does. Will Nashville (and Tennessee) continue to invest in surveillance, militarization, and tourism or will the safety and dignity of the working class people who keep the city (and state) running finally be invested in?

For residents still without power, heat, or clear answers, accountability is not about blame – it is about whether lessons will finally be learned before the next emergency arrives.

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