POWERLESS: THE PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE FOR ENERGY

By Diana Hernández & Jennifer Laird
*Reviewed by Kenneth A. Barry**

I. INTRODUCTION

"Food insecurity" has become common parlance, among the anxieties that haunt Americans stuck on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. A new book by college professors Diana Hernández and Jennifer Laird -- *Powerless: The People's Struggle for Energy"* (2025) (*Powerless*) -- urges us to move "energy insecurity" up on the list of chronic poverty issues demanding more attention and resources.[1]

The subject has many dimensions, as the 246-page volume, divided into fourteen chapters, attests.[2] Any comprehensive examination of energy issues and real-world impacts at the retail level entails a raft of technologies old and new, extensive data analysis, law and policy initiatives, economic theory and practice, climate change, and – particularly in this instance -- sociology. Out of this multifaceted deck, the authors wisely draw first from the human element, spotlighting specific instances of catastrophic incidents because utilities, landlords, or the public sector writ large didn't care enough to address extreme energy insufficiency or defective climate control equipment.

The book's dramatic opening grabs reader's attention and forces us to contemplate whether society has overlooked or underestimated the need to provide a minimum level of household energy and comfort for all. And now, well into the first year of a new Trump Administration that is prioritizing cutbacks in federal support for social services, the authors' focus on the consequences of neglect is especially timely.

What also jumps out as you start this book is the passion the authors bring to the project. While they assiduously apply their academic disciplines – with ample helpings of statistical tables and graphs -- the professors emphasize from the get-go that this book is personal as well. In the preface, the authors recount that Professor Hernández gave a guest lecture to Professor Laird's sociology students about her research work on energy insecurity. In an ensuing student focus group, the authors learned that "energy insecurity was not an abstract concept but rather

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1. Hernández is identified as an associate professor of sociomedical studies in the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. Laird is identified as an assistant professor of sociology at New York City's Lehman College, part of the CUNY system. DIANA HERNÁNDEZ & JENNIFER LAIRD, POWERLESS: THE PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE FOR ENERGY xiii (2025).

2. The book weighs in at over 300 pages when appendices, endnotes, references, and an index are taken into account.

a familiar reality among this student population" (most of whom were the first in their families to attend college).[3]

Similarly, in the introduction, the authors sound a note of distress and empathy repeated again and again in the more detailed chapters to follow:

> With access to this essential service so dependent on individual financial circumstances and resourcefulness, households too often find themselves uniquely vulnerable and frequently confronting the looming possibility of being disconnected because of unpaid bills. Individuals experiencing energy insecurity face sleepless nights, mental strain, and the guilt of failing to provide, all stemming from the unaffordability of utility services, the inefficiency of America's housing stock, and the administrative hurdles associated with seeking energy assistance. In the United States, those experiencing energy insecurity feel uncomfortable, exposed, marginalized, and dehumanized . . . . [It] becomes a source of shame that leads individuals to hide their substandard living conditions from friends and family.[4]

While the didactic element of *Powerless* is unavoidable, the authors continually splice together data on the many facets of the issue with the stories of individuals experiencing the kind of strain, suffering, and humiliation described in the quotation above. These stories were garnered in interviews the authors (especially Professor Hernández) did in researching the book, with travels across the country. The personal stories reinforce and give poignancy to the metadata distilled in cited studies replete with statistics on energy poverty, the coping techniques of those affected, and the success (or lack of same) in programs intended to mitigate energy insecurity. The book is far more compelling because the interview subjects' plights drive sympathy and compassion in ways that reams of statistics, however weighty, cannot.

The avowed goal of *Powerless* is to educate the public about an underappreciated life challenge for many Americans facing unrelenting and sometimes increasing energy bills, along with the costs of providing other human necessities. The book is also a clarion call to action, as the final paragraph of the book's preface declares:

> By providing conceptual frameworks, actionable evidence, and a treatment plan, this book aims to inspire and empower you, the reader, to take action that drives policy and social change toward household energy equity and justice.[5]

II. WHERE THE AUTHORS STAND ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

An ongoing, often contentious debate in the United States concerns what services constitute basic human needs the public sector (ultimately, taxpayers) should either provide gratis or subsidize where necessary. Primary and college education? Health care? Daycare? Food security? Housing? *Powerless* makes a powerful case that energy services deserve strong consideration. There are indications of this stance all along, but it is in the middle of the book – in a section on the many hurdles involved in seeking financial assistance -- that a pointed catechism lays this bare:

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3. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at xix.
4. *Id*. at 2.
5. *Id*. at xix.

> But should not everyone be entitled to a basic level of energy service? Do we believe it is fair and just for our nation to create energy haves and have-nots? Is energy a luxury? Should we allow households to be burdened by the inability to afford this basic necessity of life? Unfortunately, energy assistance programs in the United States are not designed to treat energy as a universal right.[6]

The authors' inclination is transparently obvious: no one in this country, they imply, should be forced to shiver or sweat in their homes, or cook on improvised but unhealthy and perhaps dangerous stoves, or (if their gas service is on) use their range as a space-heater, because of their inability to cover their electricity bills on their meager income. But it is not so obvious to political leaders, they posit. The book documents a patchwork of state and local agencies administering complex federal programs that may, but more frequently do not, provide enough financial assistance to enable low-income individuals to meet their monthly utility bills.

The problem may lie in under-resourcing these programs, or in a Kafkaesque maze of bureaucratic requirements to prove eligibility.[7] The authors describe the two national components of the "energy safety net": the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) but observe that "neither program comes close to reaching all eligible households."[8] To the contrary, they are both "underfunded and, in many ways, mistargeted."[9]

Chapter 7 delineates a myriad of hurdles and hassles in the way LIHEAP benefits are parceled out. First, Congress's overall funding for the budget year effectively caps what applicants nationwide might receive, regardless of individual or aggregate need. Next, the state-by-state allocations are biased in favor of cold-weather states (so heating needs outrank cooling needs).[10] Then, epitomizing the "patchwork" nature of the program, some states augment the limited federal funds, and each state has discretion in structuring eligibility and allocations (for example, are benefit dollars spread out among the widest number of those with qualifying incomes, or concentrated among the very poorest within the eligibility pool?)[11] Finally, applicants must swim the moat of paperwork submittal, with some state offices better equipped than others to render assistance:

> Negatively stereotyped by some as 'welfare bureaucrats,' benefits administrators have to help their clients navigate a complex web of eligibility rules and paperwork requirements. They often work in understaffed offices . . . The most effective case managers develop procedural work-arounds and are successful advocates for their clients.[12]

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6. *Id*. at 122.

7. Chapter 7 describes the exasperation of a woman who requested an extension from her public utility for paying her bill, just after her cancer surgery. The utility representative insisted on a note from her doctor, which only she (not her father) could bring, although she was fresh from surgery. The representative replied to this dilemma, according to the story, by saying she should have gotten the doctor's notice in the hands of the utility in advance of the operation. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 121.

8. *Id*. at 122-23. The authors explain that LIHEAP reaches about 20% of those eligible while WAP only gets to 0.2% of qualifying homes.

9. *Id*.

10. This bias was ameliorated in 1984, but not wholly eliminated. *Id*. at 124.

11. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 126.

12. *Id*. at 126-27.

Yet another caveat is that LIHEAP is primarily designed as aid for heating costs (whether fuel oil, gas, or electricity); but, the authors note, increasing summertime heat attributed to climate change has made *cooling* energy costs just as important to human comfort and health, especially in the Deep South states where poverty is common.

Another driver of chronic energy poverty is the dilapidated or poorly insulated condition of housing stock so often inhabited by lower-income residents. The authors devote an entire section (Chapter 4, "The Physical Dimension: Disrepair and Drafts") to this syndrome of unaffordable repairs leading to even less affordable energy costs (or simply doing without). In several case studies, the book describes how difficult it is for people with little financial means to replace broken or inefficient heating or cooling facilities, or to remedy inadequate insulation. The upshot is that such residents suffer from uncomfortable or outright unhealthy indoor environments or, alternatively, have higher energy costs to bear versus well-insulated homes. For apartment dwellers, the root of the problem may be traced to an indifferent landlord who cares little for renters' comfort and/or lacks financial incentives to invest in better equipment or insulation.[13]

Enter WAP, the federal weatherization program. But the headwinds for this program's would-be beneficiaries appear even more daunting than those facing LIHEAP applicants. The authors cite many of the same challenges: e.g., lack of awareness about the program; insufficient funding; and red tape complicating gaining eligibility.[14] Beyond that, the authors list several attitudinal factors (such as bad experiences with deceptive marketers of renewable energy or solar installations)[15] or mistrust in general in partnering with the government. Stringent criteria for payback ratios also screen out some worthwhile projects, the authors noted.[16]

The chapter includes a host of suggestions for reform of these underperforming programs. Unsurprisingly, the top recommendation is to raise the budgets, in these times of higher energy costs and "global warming [increasing] extreme weather events."[17] The challenge here, I'm sure the authors would agree, is that the current federal administration is headed in the opposite direction (looking to cut the budget for social assistance and pass the baton to the states).[18]

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13. *Id*. at 82-94.

14. *Id*. at 133.

15. In this regard, the authors draw on a case study in Michigan where only 15% of an initially identified set of applicants actually made it to the application stage and even fewer – 6% – received an assistance grant. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 134.

16. *Id*. at 134-35.

17. *Id*.

18. See Yasmeen Abutaleb & Maeve Reston, *States Face Massive New Costs Under Trump Budget Cuts*, WASH. POST POL. (last updated Sep. 8, 2025), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/09/08/states-medicaid-snap-cuts-trump/

III. HOW BIG IS THE "ENERGY INSECURITY" PROBLEM?

It's bigger than you might think, the authors of *Powerless* persuasively argue. Appropriately, the book dwells at length on the defining characteristics and dimensions of this peculiar form of hardship, and there are reminders scattered throughout that energy penury is more common than the public – at least those of us able to manage our monthly utility bills – might think. But the point is addressed more head-on in Chapter 2 ("The Prevalence of Energy Insecurity in the United States"). Here, the authors broadly demonstrate that their anecdotal evidence of mental stress and physical deprivation are representative of large slice of the population.

To present a clear idea of the issue's scope, Hernández and Laird have mastered a wealth of third-party survey data and rendered it digestible in cogent prose and easy-to-read graphs and charts. Especially revealing is a map of the U.S. that reflects the extent of energy insecurity being experienced in each state.[19] A major accomplishment is the development of a multi-pronged set of criteria for judging – as objectively as possible given the inherently subjective nature of some aspects – whether individual households should be deemed "energy insecure."[20]

The key findings of this chapter, along with the authors' observations as sociologists, are too meaty to summarize here, but a major takeaway is that somewhere between 10 - 13% of households in America meet the authors' definition of "energy insecure."[21] Notably, this is a much larger number than the subset of those experiencing actual disconnections – a group pegged as between 2 - 5%.[22] And while this percentage of disconnected households in a given year is relatively small, it's not negligible. The authors report that 2.2 million households endured shutoffs in 2020 – a year when the pandemic induced many states to implement disconnection moratoriums – and, going back to 2015, over 3 million homes were disconnected.[23]

In light of the acute deprivation and despair service cutoffs cause to such families – often with small children to care for and no savings to fall back on – *Powerless* devotes an entire chapter ("Disconnections") to the topic.[24] The section focuses on the ordeals of two families – one in Fresno, California, the other in Philadelphia – as they pinball between low-paying or spotty jobs, utility offices, friends or relatives (often hard up themselves), and public assistance agencies, all while trying to run a home without electricity or gas. The chapter goes on to explore the jagged landscape of state and utility forgiveness policies, which tend to show more clemency for the elderly and ill than to young families. There are also seasonal variations, so that a household with arrearages in the winter may avoid

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19. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 56 fig. 2.6

20. *Id*. at 49-54 (presenting a long table of "Dimensions and Indicators of Energy Insecurity . . . ." spanning physical conditions of housing, economic factors and triggers, coping mechanisms, and consequences.) *Id*. at 49 fig. 2.1.

21. *Id*. at 57.

22. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 44.

23. *Id*. at 145.

24. *Id*. at 141-157.

disconnection, only to face it in the spring. The authors advocate stronger regulations to limit disconnections and "sturdier umbrellas" in public assistance programs.[25]

IV. "STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS": HOW HISTORY HAS STACKED THE DECK

Powerless could have maintained a tighter focus on the more literal or physical meaning of its title. That is, it could have concentrated on documenting the extent of energy insecurity in America and the stresses it causes to individual lives and families. However, the authors take it up a notch with Chapter 11 ("The Structural Determinants of Energy Insecurity") by veering into more vividly political terrain.

The overriding argument is that the sufferings, physical and economic, of the energy-deprived are the fault of an inequitable system, rooted in a long history of discrimination against the underclass. And it is part of an all-encompassing syndrome, the authors maintain:

> Energy insecurity parallels other inequities in the experience of poverty, including education, mass incarceration, eviction, and other well-recognized social problems that often attract greater public policy and scholarly attention.[26]

In this chapter, the authors adopt, in an energy context, the socio-historical critique of many Progressive academics, activists, and opinion leaders in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement (peaking in 2021-2022). "Structural racism," they submit, "profoundly limits the opportunities of communities of color in the United States through its effects on income and employment opportunities, health and educational trajectories, housing conditions, and environmental exposures." These "inequities," they add, "have existed for centuries" and constitute a "root cause of energy insecurity" in that they impact a person's wealth, education, *etc.*[27]

After several pages detailing these disadvantages and their interplay, the authors sum it up. The culprit is a "racialized" society, one that perpetuates the existence of a class saddled by multiple disadvantages:

> Energy insecurity is symptomatic of entrenched inequalities that manifest in divergent housing, wealth, and income trajectories. These disparities are historically embedded and perpetuated by contemporary policies and practices.[28]

This chapter also views "energy systems" – and by extension their users – as beholden to "market-based institutions." The "cost of energy," the authors maintain,

> is set by market-based institutions that control production costs, supply and demand, competition, global politics, infrastructure, and distribution and operating costs as well as regulatory pricing, taxes, and fees.[29]

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25. *Id*. at 157.
26. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 193.
27. *Id*. at 195.
28. *Id*. at 203.
29. *Id*. at 199-200.

This is partially valid but seems too sweeping a statement. Transmission and distribution costs and rates remain regulated services in both the electricity and gas arenas, while in about half the states, generation infrastructure (and rates based on these major fixed costs) are also closely regulated. It is nevertheless true that fuel inputs in both energy industries are driven by market forces.

An ensuing chapter – (Chapter 12, "Energy Insecurity from Grid Failure and Long-Term Power Outages") -- takes a critical look at a system increasingly under stress from climate change, according to the authors. Examining the frequency of extended power outages across the U.S. and Puerto Rico, the book claims that the transition to clean energy with backup storage is "critical to mitigate the worst effects of climate change," but at the same time acknowledges that the costs of modernizing the grid will, at least in the short run, increase the cost of energy and thereby the population of those experiencing energy insecurity.[30]

Chapter 13 ("Policy Pathways to Household Energy Security for All") catalogs an assortment of guiding principles and practical steps for readers to gain more agency in reforming programs and processes the book found wanting. The latter range from inculcating "energy literacy" (enabling customers to understand their bills and the drivers behind them) to participating in regulatory and governmental forums, giving visibility and voice to those struggling to pay their utility bills.

V. CONCLUSION

First, I should acknowledge what is so plainly well-wrought and, indeed, powerful about *Powerless.* Deeply researched and consistently well written – at times rising to eloquence – it reflects the authors' commitment, their meticulous development of data, and their foregrounding of complementary, flesh-and-blood stories to paint a vivid, sometimes wrenching portrait of energy poverty in America. It succeeds admirably in its most obvious mission: imparting a stronger sense of obligation for the nation to find the resources and revamp its social services machinery to do better by the least fortunate among us.

However, the authors have resolved to go beyond this most immediate goal, by engaging in a searing critique of the political and business environment in which the under-resourcing of relief agencies has occurred. While this tack can help stir concerned people into action – a legitimate objective, to be sure – there's arguably a tradeoff. It may alienate the very individuals and institutions currently in positions to effect change and otherwise, one hopes, inclined to be sympathetic to the plight of the energy-impoverished living in a nation of self-proclaimed energy abundance.

The authors dual goals (and thus the tension) come to a crescendo in a short final chapter entitled "Shifting the Power Dynamics."[31]

This epilogue, early on, declares its intent:

30. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 218-19.

31. *Id*. 242-246.

> Having made energy insecurity visible through firsthand accounts of people who experienced energy insecurity and two national surveys that revealed its prevalence across the U.S. population, we must now unmask its primary cause: severely imbalanced power dynamics [emphasis added].[32]

What follows is a rhetorical broadside aimed at the owners of assets in America and the legislators and regulators who allegedly protect their interests, at the expense of ordinary working (or elderly or handicapped) folks. The latter groups are the "powerless" in the secondary meaning of the book's title, in the authors perspective. The key "structures" (political, environmental, economic) are "fundamentally unequal and unjust."[33] These structures

> [R]eflect and uphold the hegemony of an unfair society in which racism, sexism, classism, and the intersection of these forces disadvantage some groups while greatly privileging others. Some segments of the population struggle to access the energy resources essential for meeting their daily needs. Others profit from exploitative practices that perpetuate hardship . . . ."[34]

Cited as actors in this chain of "exploitation" are, first, negligent property landlords, but also "entrenched politicians" who allegedly "prioritize the interests of powerful corporations and investors."[35] Later, the section depicts the "energy underclass" the book highlights as emerging from "the greed, neglect, and unchecked authority of the powerful: energy service providers, property owners, employers, and politicians."[36]

The lecture further castigates "outdated utility laws" designed to "ensure profits" even though "cloaked in the illusion of equality and fairness."[37] The section also skewers regulatory proceedings where, ostensibly, "utility providers" troop before commissioners with all the "legal representation, relationships, and money" they can muster to "all but guarantee a desirable outcome for themselves."[38]

The image is one of a rate adjudication process totally stacked against ordinary ratepayers who must, in their aftermath, face "ever-intensifying financial burdens" as "many . . . dread opening bills they cannot pay."[39]

This is strong stuff. As pure advocacy, it's not totally outlandish. In this, as in other parts of the book, the authors display a good amount of understanding about the energy business and its oversight. However, as an objective description of the regulatory process, it is a stretch. Ratepayers are generally well-represented in federal and state proceedings by staff and, frequently, by other intervenors groups present to rein in the ambitions of the utilities. The latter, by and large, have a sense of responsibility to the public, even as they work to protect their investors and lenders. Most regulators, in my experience, conscientiously seek to

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32. *Id*. at 242.
33. *Id*.
34. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 242.
35. *Id*.
36. *Id*. at 244.
37. *Id*. at 242.
38. HERNÁNDEZ & LAIRD, *supra* note 1, at 242-43.
39. *Id*. at 243.

strike a balance between fairness and affordability to ratepayers and the need of utilities to attract investment, whether equity or debt.

The authors are perhaps on sounder ground in charging that "politicians and bureaucrats have been complicit in allowing energy insecurity to persist."[40] This is, after all, the thrust of the evidentiary portions of *Powerless.* However, the "plague on all your houses" flavor of these concluding pages has the potential to turn off potential (and powerful) allies outside the circle of left-leaning politicians that have been singing from the same hymnal for years. The seismic shift in the distribution of political power envisioned in the last chapter is probably unattainable, however earnestly wished.

Despite these reservations, the book stands as an important contribution in the cause of alleviating the desperation of households hard-pressed to pay their energy bills. Moreover, it is ultimately up to the authors to suggest who are at fault and how harshly they should be called out in the pages of their fervently written volume. And then, in turn, it's up to readers to decide how justified these critiques are, as they recalibrate their own support for overcoming the inertia and closing the gaps in the safety net.

40. *Id*.