

Climate Control for Extreme Temperatures in Corrections

Position Statement

Extreme indoor and outdoor temperatures adversely affect the health of people residing and working in carceral settings. Every carceral facility should implement standards to minimize extreme temperature exposure indoors and outdoors and adopt steps for prevention and mitigation.

Discussion

Climate scientists forecast rising ambient temperatures and days with extreme heat in addition to greater variation in weather, including cold spells.

In major cities across the United States, heat waves are occurring more frequently than they have in the past, increasing from an average of two per year during the 1960s to six per year during the 2010s and 2020s.¹ Notably, the average heat wave season across 50 cities included in an Environmental Protection Agency study is roughly 46 days longer now than it was in the 1960s.¹ By middle of this century, the annual numbers of days with heat indices exceeding 100 °F and 105 °F are projected to double and triple, respectively, compared to a 1971–2000 baseline.²

There is robust evidence that high temperatures in carceral facilities are associated with morbidity and mortality.^{3,4} Certain areas of the facility may be more prone to extreme high temperatures, such as kitchen or laundry areas, if there is insufficient cooling and ventilation in those areas. Extreme cold also poses risk from inadequate and/or uneven indoor heating and unmitigated outdoor exposures for incarcerated people and carceral employees.⁵

High temperatures impose physiological stress on the human body, putting older people, those with mental disorders, those who take medications that affect body temperature regulation, and those who have certain comorbidities at risk for hospitalization or death.⁶⁻⁹ High temperatures also impair sleep quality and exacerbate sleep apnea,¹⁰ and are associated with occupational safety.¹¹⁻¹³ Air conditioning and appropriate heating in carceral facilities is protective.¹⁴ For those who work outside, access to water/hydration and sun protection is also protective.

There is some, albeit mixed, evidence of the impact of heat on judicial, police, and other decision-making.¹⁵⁻²⁰ Numerous studies, including systematic reviews and meta-analyses, show high temperatures are associated with worse mental health, aggressive behavior, and, importantly, higher rates of suicide and violence.²¹⁻³³ Adverse heat-related effects on mental health and violence have been shown in corrections^{34,35} and appear causal.³⁶ Temperature control policies are lacking in many state prisons³⁷ and, to date, court cases have been the main recourse.⁴ A recent national survey of jail leaders found high levels of support for adequate air conditioning in jails.³⁸ A review of 100 legal cases related to carceral temperature exposures found 61 cases related to cold exposure, 32 related to heat exposure, and seven related to both.⁵

In summary, there is compelling evidence that exposure to extreme temperatures has adverse physical, mental, and behavioral effects, including increasing mortality. These exposures in carceral environments, whether

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indoors or outdoors, undermine the principle of proportionality in terms of retribution and the principle of rehabilitation based on worsening mental effects and violence. Given the absence of policies and transparency surrounding this issue, NCCHC exhorts all carceral facilities to implement standards to minimize extreme temperature exposures and adopt prevention and mitigation steps by incorporating these considerations as a component of the facility's safety plan and housing plan.

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