Killer heat wave in southwest US

Death toll high among immigrants, elderly

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Sweltering temperatures across the southwest area of the United States have claimed the lives of over 120 people in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, California, Arizona and Missouri. From the state of Florida in the South through Texas and Colorado, nearly two months of continuous heat and drought have caused scores of deaths, burned out homes and withered crops.

It is the highest number of people to die from heat-related deaths in the United States since July 1995, when extremely high temperatures claimed over 500 lives, mainly in the city of Chicago. Many who died in that tragedy lived in high-rise project complexes without any air conditioning.

The bulk of the victims this year, some 80 people, are from the state of Texas, where temperatures have been in the triple digits for the past 15 days. Of these, 43 were undocumented immigrants who perished in an effort to cross the border from poverty-stricken conditions in Mexico. According to the Border Patrol this number is a conservative estimate. Many more are presumed dead, yet to be discovered in the desert.

A Mexican newspaper, *El Diario* of Juarez, Mexico, reported temperatures of 150 degrees Fahrenheit inside a sealed boxcar containing 11 workers, three of whom had died. Smugglers, who take what little possessions these workers have, lock their human cargo in boxcars to deter inspections. This means that the undocumented cannot get out until someone lets them out.

In Douglas, Arizona three Mexican woman, one 85 years old, were found near death after going without water for an entire day. Following the hospitalization and treatment of the elderly women, all three were deported back to Mexico by American authorities.

While most media accounts portray the heat wave as a “natural tragedy,” there is an important social dimension. An examination of who has suffered and why points to the class and social divisions within American society.

The overwhelming majority of victims in every state have been working class and poor. For Mexican workers seeking entry into the United States the conditions at home are so deplorable that they are willing to take high risks in an effort to survive.

For low-wage workers who are American born, and particularly for the elderly, conditions are little better than for the immigrants. Of the 22 who died in Dallas, Texas most lived in mobile homes and trailer parks without air conditioning, and in some cases without fans. Others died in rural areas without fans or with limited access to water. In other cases the victims were elderly people living on fixed incomes, who are reluctant to use air conditioning even if it were available for fear of high utility bills.

Cases where the victims of heat stroke survived further expose the horrible conditions people are facing. A young temporary worker living in Texas could only afford to buy a single $16 window fan to cool her and two children in a three-bedroom apartment. After her four-year-old child started waking in the middle of the night sweating and vomiting she sought assistance from the Salvation Army. A middle-aged worker slept in a mobile home without air conditioning before working the night shift at Union Pacific in Fort Worth. Homeless shelters in Dallas have overflowed with many sleeping on the floor striving to escape the baking concrete streets.

While high temperatures with readings of 100 to 113 degrees Fahrenheit have affected the Dallas area since May, no serious measures were taken to provide assistance until reports emerged of the many heat-related deaths. The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs is seeking aid from a $300 million

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emergency fund run by the federal government, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. No specific amount has been allocated for the state and no date given for when funds will be available.

The Texas Health Department is requesting that utility companies not cut off residents' electricity for nonpayment until the heat wave is over. However, this is not a long-term solution, as many, unable to pay bills accrued during this period, will lose basic utilities for the winter and beyond.

While the conditions of extreme heat have killed dozens and caused huge economic losses—a projected $1.7 billion for the region, including agricultural losses of $517 million—utility companies have seen a massive increase in profits. A spokesman for the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which covers 80 percent of the state, said, "Financially, the utilities are probably collecting a lot of money."

In the city of Austin alone the hot month of June will mean an estimated increase of $5 million in local utility revenues. Commenting on the crisis, two officials of city-owned Austin Energy summed up the sheer indifference to popular suffering so common among official circles in America.

Milton Lee, the utility's general manager, was quoted in the *Austin American-Statesman* saying, "The 100-degree days in Austin need to continue. Don't let there be a cold front." The company expects a 12 percent increase in profits over last year, and revenues of $680 million.

Steven Bartley, the vice president for finance, said that the heat wave has boosted sales from Austin Energy to other utilities through the state power grid. "We're making $60,000 to $75,000 profit every day off those sales!" he boasted.

These statements appeared on June 18, after over 100 people had been reported dead from the heat, many of whom either could not buy air conditioning or couldn't afford to turn it on.

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