

Homeless die in Arizona heat wave

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In Phoenix, Arizona last week at least 21 people, 14 of whom have been identified as homeless, have died from exposure to extreme temperatures in excess of 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43 degrees Centigrade). In addition, at least 13 undocumented immigrants have died trying to cross the desert region on the Arizona-Mexico border. Temperatures have exceeded 100 degrees in Phoenix for weeks on end, with 14 days in July having highs of 110 degrees or more.

The conditions in Phoenix are part of a larger heat wave that has swept across much of the United States, with temperatures in Las Vegas, Denver, Chicago, Washington D.C. and scores of other cities reaching record highs anywhere between 100-120 degrees. The extreme heat has been particularly severe and prolonged in the southwest region of the country. While the deaths in Phoenix have drawn the most attention, there have undoubtedly been many heat-related deaths in other cities throughout the country.

At least 200 heat records have been broken this month in different parts of the country. Parts of 23 states have been under heat advisory at some point during the month. Over the weekend, Chicago experienced temperatures not seen since the 1995 heat wave that killed hundreds. Three heat-related deaths have been reported so far.

While the homeless are considered to be at the highest risk for death due to prolonged heat exposure, anyone who works outdoors or does not have a cooling system in their home is also considered at risk, particularly the elderly.

While the official death toll for last week currently stands at 21, the *Arizona Republic* stated Sunday that it “is probably only a small portion of the true figure, according to experts. The actual number is probably much higher, a number not captured in statistics because heat is either not listed on the death certificate or listed only as a contributing factor.”

A total of 21 heat-related deaths in Phoenix for one week in July is particularly alarming considering that the total number of heat-related deaths throughout the entire previous year was 34.

The number of homeless who have died in Phoenix is due in large part to the fact that the city does not have sufficient homeless shelters to allow people to escape from the blistering heat. Central Arizona Shelter Services is equipped to accommodate 520 people. Including other shelters there are only 1,600 beds available in the country, while the number of homeless people in the county is estimated at 10-12,000. Many of the beds are available only in the winter.

The bodies of the homeless were found in dirt lots, vehicles, and between buildings. Police and others who volunteered to bring water to homeless people found that some were too weak to move. Some homeless people have taken to swimming in canals to stay cool during the day.

The extent of the situation facing the city’s homeless was captured by Stephanie Farwig, assistant development director of the Phoenix Rescue Mission, who told AFP, “They [the homeless] don’t have the protection from the sun nor the liquids that they need...when the temperature is 115 degrees F, the pavement is 130 degrees and people’s feet are burned even through their shoes.”

Eric Klinenberg, a sociology professor at New York University and author of the book *Heatwave*, which covers the 1995 Chicago heatwave that took the lives of hundreds in that city, told the *Arizona Republic*, “They’re the invisible people...the elderly, the poor, or in your case, the homeless. They’re not the people we normally talk about...heat waves pinpoint the most vulnerable in society.”

City officials have scrambled to say they have taken steps to deal with the problem, but it has become apparent that a lack of preparation and a failure to

address the situation of the homeless in Phoenix for years has exacerbated the effects of the heat wave. Since the 1990s, the city government in conjunction with major corporations based in the city have implemented plans to renovate downtown Phoenix and create a “business friendly” environment. Similar plans have been developed in downtown Tempe, a city adjoining Phoenix. In both areas, the homeless are seen largely as a nuisance, either to be ignored if possible or driven out altogether when their presence conflicts with the long-term business plan.

The discrepancy between the total 1,600 available spaces for homeless individuals and the actual number of homeless cannot be explained away by a lack of resources—not when the meager facilities that *do* exist are in the shadows of real estate valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars. It can only be explained by a lack of any will or desire to take the homeless and their situation seriously.

Working families that cannot afford air-conditioning in their homes and vehicles are also at risk, and even those who have cooling systems have to worry about possible brownouts and blackouts. The intense heat wave coincides with the beginning of the monsoon season. Last week a severe storm knocked out power lines providing energy to 47,000 homes in the greater Phoenix area, prompting local firefighters, paramedics and volunteers to distribute bottled water in some of the affected neighborhoods.

Local utility providers have stated that the heat wave has placed a strain on energy supplies, although they claim that there is enough energy to supply Phoenix and surrounding cities. Nevertheless, energy prices are expected to rise with the increasing demand.

Immigrants crossing the Arizona border are also particularly vulnerable to the heat. The dangers of crossing the desert, either by foot or crammed into the back of trucks and vans, as many immigrants often are, are quite severe. The Arizona Border Patrol found 13 bodies over the course of the last week, many along the side of common smuggling highways. In many cases the bodies were found days after death had occurred.

According to the US Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, 101 immigrants have died of heat-related causes attempting to cross the border since October. During the 12 months prior to October, 95 immigrants died because of extreme heat.

On July 9th The Border Patrol arrested volunteers from the group “No More Deaths,” who have stationed themselves along the border for years to provide supplies to immigrants traversing the desert. The volunteers were arrested for transporting immigrants in their vehicles to receive medical attention. Border Patrol agents claimed that the immigrants— one of whom was vomiting blood and another, a 13 year old boy who had severe blisters on his feet—did not seem sick and that there were “many emergency resources out there [hence] no need for anybody to transport illegal aliens in their own vehicle.”

While prolonged exposure to intense heat was the immediate cause of death for the homeless, elderly, and immigrants in Arizona, most of these deaths could have been prevented if adequate resources were made available. In a part of the country where the temperature has been known to rise to life-threatening levels in the past, these were the people whose health and protection from the elements should have been considered.



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