US heat wave preys on poor

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The heat wave engulfing much of the US and Canada is threatening the lives of those least able to protect themselves from extreme conditions of heat and humidity, especially the elderly, the poor, undocumented immigrants workers, and the infirm.

In south Texas, the Rio Grande Valley Border Patrol Sector has been put on alert for an increase in deaths among immigrants crossing the US-Mexican border in search of work. The heavy militarized presence of US immigration authorities at urban border crossings forces these workers and their families into remote desert crossings that become increasingly perilous in extreme heat.

Reuters News Service reported this week that the Border Patrol has already noted "an alarming spike in deaths of illegal immigrants." The article quoted a supervisory agent from Edinburg, Texas, and the Rio Grande Valley sector, who said, "Cases of dehydration and heat exhaustion are way up. We are seeing it with elderly people, young children…who try to make it through the brush country in this heat."

Along the Texas and Mexican border, many communities, commonly referred to as *colonias,* do not have electricity or running water.

A July 19, CBS/AP article cited the example from Horizon City, Texas, near El Paso, of María Teresa Escamilla's "new home" in a *colonia*, after she departed her air conditioned apartment that she could no longer afford. To finance the building of her home, she was compelled to "take out a loan against her funeral services (to) buy building materials recycled from demolition sites in Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso."

Escamilla has little protection from the triple digit blazing sun of west Texas in the cinderblock structure, which has only a partial roof and no electricity. *Colonias* often lack basic utilities leaving residents on their own to secure water, electricity, gas, and sewerage.

Norma Salazar resides on the outskirts of El Paso with her husband and six children in a tiny trailer house, with only fans and an ineffective "swamp cooler" to combat the oven-like temperatures in their home.

Salazar told the CBS/AP reporter, "When it gets really hot, we turn on the fans and stay inside. The car doesn't have air conditioning, so getting there (to an air conditioned library or mall to keep cool) is even worse than just staying inside, not moving."

Eleven hundred miles north of El Paso, the heat index reached 106 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, this week, where the Salvation Army's homeless shelter allowed about 200 people to remain during the day after sleeping there overnight.

Bill Miller, executive director of the shelter, the Harbor Light Center said to CBS/AP, "We don't have them leave when it's this hot. In this heat, it could kill you."

Betty Jean, age 55, departed the shelter into the hot morning of July 18. She walked six blocks before turning back. "I almost passed out because of the heat," she said, reporting that she has diabetes, epilepsy and hypertension, as she shoved along her belongings in a baby stroller. Had the shelter been closed, she says "I would probably have died."

Summertime heat waves are thought to kill hundreds of Americans every year, by far the most common victims being the elderly, the young, and the working or homeless poor with inadequate protection from the elements. Among these groups the most vulnerable to dehydration and overheating are those with chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, and emphysema, and who are taking medications for these diseases. A number of medications that are required to treat and manage these and other illnesses have the undesirable side effect of impairing the body's heat and

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cooling regulatory mechanisms.

The human body cools by the evaporation of sweat. This process is impaired by moist humid air, which makes the weather feel far hotter than reported temperatures.

During a comparable heat wave July, 12-15, 1995, Chicago saw 750 residents die. All of the factors that led to that catastrophe have worsened over the ensuing years: unemployment, poverty, and poor public infrastructure. For example, instead of upgrading school buildings so that students and teachers can handle extremely hot days, city officials this week are handing out 1500 box fans to public schools and advising teachers to keep window shades down and to move pupils to cooler rooms.

In Detroit, over 70 non-air conditioned schools were closed this week, as well as a number of others where there were power outages and mechanical problems.

In Minot, North Dakota, the sweltering weather inflicted new misery on a tent city of about 150 people dislodged by the flooding of the Souris River two months ago. The tent city is near the Minot's ice arena. "It's hot and humid and people are coming in to watch the ice more than they had been trying to cool off," said arena manager Chuck Emery. "The RVs all have air conditioners but the tent folks have been moving their tents around trying to find shade."

The potential for a public health emergency in New York City, the nation's largest city, in an extended heat wave is well known. There has been little preparation. Democratic Senator Charles E. Schumer captured the indifference of the financial and political elite to the situation when he declared this week that "[b]eating the heat shouldn't break the bank for New Yorkers."

In keeping with this spirit New York State set aside a miserly $3 million of additional funding for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to assist in providing air-conditioning units for about 3700 households. The symbolic gesture is absurd on its face: 3,700 households represent about 1/1000th of the number of households in New York City; $3 million dollars represents but .016 percent of the $18 billion fortune of just one of New York City's 66 billionaires, Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

New York officials have made it virtually impossible to gain access to the additional funds. One in four persons in the household must be certified to be chronically ill with a disease that is known to be worsened by extreme heat. The household must also be certified to have no more income than $48,000 for the family of four. And further, according to *the Register-Star* of the Hudson-Catskill Newspapers, the family must furnish a "written documentation, dated within the last six months, that air conditioning assistance is critical to prevent a heat emergency."

Meanwhile, the heat wave continues. It has so far sent temperatures soaring in over two dozen states with 141 million people covering an area of approximately one million square miles. On July 19, seventeen states recorded temperatures over 100 degrees, and forty states above 90 degrees. Thirty-four states had heat indexes over 100 on July 20.

According to Eli Jacks, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Silver Spring, Maryland, a gigantic high-pressure system has formed a dome in the upper atmosphere over the middle US, trapping and compressing downward the air below.

This system in turn pushes the jet stream farther north, at present into southern Canada, while the hot air beneath the dome spins and draws humidity from the Gulf of Mexico and saturates the lower levels with dramatically elevated dew temperatures.

Meteorologists have said that while heat domes are not rare, the present one is much larger and longer-lasting than usual. It envelopes the whole of the US southwest, all of the northern plains, all of the Midwest, and is gradually moving to the eastern seaboard and all of its major cities.

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