

322 possible heat-related deaths in Maricopa County, Arizona

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In Maricopa County, Arizona, 322 possible heat-related deaths are being investigated, with 100 of these deaths taking place in a single week, July 7-13, when temperatures reached 118 degrees Fahrenheit (48 degrees Celsius). At this point, 23 deaths are confirmed in the county, with 17 being directly caused by heat and six others being “heat-contributed.” This is likely a vast undercount as heat deaths are frequently not recorded as such.

The 10 warmest years in the recorded history of world temperatures, going back to 1850, have all occurred in the last decade. This crisis has created conditions for global heat waves that have killed thousands of people and sickened tens of thousands. This is in addition to the associated increasing number of extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods and tornadoes, as well as the spread of infectious diseases, which include mosquito-, flea- and tick-borne diseases, as well as the spillovers of viruses (and other pathogens) to humans from animals.

In the United States, this has resulted in hundreds of heat deaths, particularly in the Southwest in 2023, as well as 33 in the Western US reported earlier this month.

In Houston, Texas, at least half of the official deaths from Hurricane Beryl have been due to heat. The disaster itself was a result of global warming and negligence by the local, state and federal government, as well as the profit-hungry power company CenterPoint energy, leading to nearly 3 million homes and businesses lacking power in the midst of a heat wave. The death toll is likely to rise, as the cleanup efforts as well as power outages continue. Houston has been the subject of numerous hurricanes and associated power outages, such as Hurricane Harvey in 2017, when 350,000 CenterPoint customers were left without

power, and in 2008, when Hurricane Ike left 2.26 million customers in the dark. That CenterPoint was unprepared was unsurprising and demonstrates the incompatibility of for-profit utilities and basic human needs.

In 2021, tens of millions across Texas were hit by power outages in the midst of a winter blast, leading to hundreds of deaths. The state’s grid was previously taken off the national grid to facilitate deregulation in favor of for-profit power providers. That the state experienced the highest number of weather-related power outages from 2000 to 2023 is a function of this for-profit deregulation scheme.

Last year, there were 645 heat deaths in Arizona’s Maricopa County alone. This represented an increase of 52 percent over the previous year. The majority of these deaths, 60 percent, were among “non-Hispanic White individuals” with 78 percent being male and two thirds over age 50. Almost half of those who died were experiencing homelessness.

The 2023 Heat Related Deaths Report, while presenting these facts, is also a grotesque whitewash, as exposed on page 4 of the report where deaths are mentioned. Graphics on the number of drug users, that one out of two had “physical/mental health conditions” and that “71% of heat related deaths occurred on a day with an excessive heat warning” are intended to lay blame on the victims themselves for using drugs and being homeless.

This reasoning is absurd, considering that almost 20 percent of Americans experience some form of mental illness, and at least 129 million people in the US (roughly 39 percent) have at least one major chronic disease such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity or hypertension, according to the CDC. More than 40 percent of the US population is obese. This argument

could easily be used to justify the heat death of any average American.

In many ways, the report is a variant of the Biden administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which it embraced eugenics claiming that it was "encouraging news" that COVID-19 predominantly kills people who are "unwell to begin with." It also mirrors the "you do you" personal responsibility argument, claiming what is clearly a social problem boils down to personal responsibility.

If the matter of heat deaths is to be addressed, those who are homeless must be housed. The homelessness crisis is itself a function of the lack of affordable housing, exacerbated by real estate speculators, the spiraling increase in the cost of living and the lack of well-paying jobs, squeezing more profits out of the working class by forcing down wages.

The Maricopa County government's "Heat Relief Network," funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Heat Relief Grant, reached just tens of thousands of people in 2023 in a county of 4.5 million. The county accounts for more than half the population of Arizona, which stood at 7.3 million in 2022.

The heat deaths come as a consequence of global warming, which is a result of the failure of capitalist governments to do anything to substantially curb greenhouse gas production, and the reckless continuation of the reliance on fossil fuels by the energy industry.

The US military is the largest consumer of energy in the US and is the "world's largest institutional user of petroleum and correspondingly, the single largest institutional producer of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the world," according to the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University.

The solution to global warming and its associated social misery, including heat deaths, is to build a mass movement of the working class against capitalism and war to fight for a socialist society planned on the basis of human need.



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