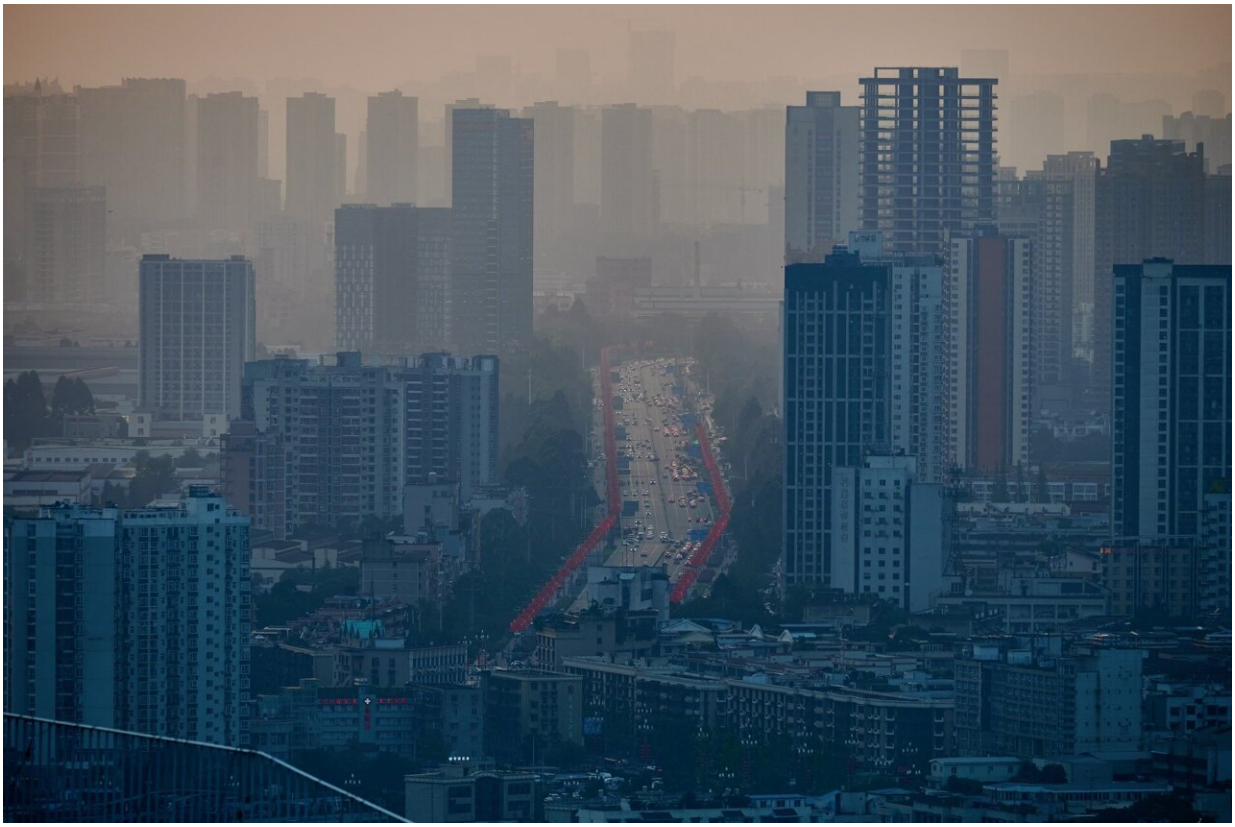
Policy reform urged for seniors' air conditioning access

July 30 2024



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Policy reform is urgently needed to assist older adults who live in southern U.S. cities and who experience higher-than-expected heat-related health issues if they don't have adequate access to air

conditioning, according to a new study by University of Waterloo researchers.

The study's findings lead the researchers to suggest policymakers mitigate extreme heat conditions and adverse health conditions for older adults by requiring air conditioning in all new residential home construction or by addressing the high costs of operating air conditioners.

The study, "Socio-demographic determinants of extreme heat and ozone risk among older adults in three sun belt cities," was published in *The Journals of Gerontology, Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*.

"We're very aware of wintertime issues and extreme cold, but it's time that we start looking at policies for addressing extreme heat as well," said Dr. Peter Crank, professor in the Faculty of Environment.

"We have to consider planning for places that are historically hot, but also other parts across Canada and the U.S. which have seen significant heat wave events in the past few years."

The researchers analyzed the various health issues of 900 older adults who live in Phoenix, Houston, and Los Angeles, three U.S. cities that lie within the Sun Belt where daytime temperatures often surpass 100°F (37°C).

While most of those adults surveyed have air conditioning installed, they still experience health issues due to extreme heat or ozone due to the higher cost of using their air conditioning or being able to afford repairs to their units.

"It's not overly shocking that many people would say that they have felt

some sort of heat related symptoms," said Crank. "What was really surprising to us is how much the physical and building characteristics play a role in older adults' perception of their well-being."

The study also found that renovating homes to address weather-related issues such as weatherstripping around doors, increasing insulation and upgrading energy efficiency could help mitigate extreme heat-related health risks. However, the researchers believe the greatest impact on reducing those health issues would be policy reform to improve access to central air conditioning in homes.

"We need intentional policy and planning to address the heat risk among older adults," Crank said. "These policies span revising building codes for new housing units, setting expectations for upgrading existing rental units and revising utility company guidelines for delinquent pay."

The researcher's plan to share their findings with government agencies, health networks, and advocacy groups across the U.S. and Canada.

More information: Peter J Crank et al, Sociodemographic Determinants of Extreme Heat and Ozone Risk Among Older Adults in 3 Sun Belt Cities, *The Journals of Gerontology, Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences* (2024). DOI: 10.1093/gerona/glae164

Provided by University of Waterloo

provided for information purposes only.