

Cooler Cities, Fairer Futures: Connecting research and praxis on heat, justice and the politics of exposure

Position Paper



RMIT
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Centre for
Urban Research

Living with increasing heat is a growing concern in communities across Australia and around the world. Heat does not simply make us more uncomfortable. It has rapid and cumulative effects. These contribute to illness and death, disrupt work, education, transport and essential infrastructure, increase household energy costs, place pressure on public services, and affect how people experience their homes and neighbourhoods.

Importantly, these impacts are not experienced equally. Older people, young children, people with disability or chronic illness, renters, low-income households, outdoor workers and people living in poorly insulated housing or areas with limited shade, vegetation, water and services are often the most exposed and the least able to respond.

Urban heat is therefore a question of planetary health, social justice, urban governance and responsibility to Country and future generations.

How we respond to the drivers of increasing heat, the impacts of these drivers and their potential to exacerbate existing social, ecological and health inequalities will have lasting effects.

This Position Paper scopes the urgent social and ecological justice implications of increasing heat. These implications are serious but are not yet being fully recognised. Nor are they fully understood. Focused particularly on living with increasing heat in towns and cities, but with implications in all places, the Position Paper lays out an agenda for evidence-informed action for addressing this most pressing of challenges.

Why are our homes, streets, neighbourhoods and cities getting hotter?

As the world warms, our everyday experience of heat is intensifying. In cities, towns and neighbourhoods, and in our homes, these experiences are profoundly shaped by the way cities are planned, built and governed. Housing design and affordability, land use, development patterns, infrastructure investment, access to trees and waterways, transport systems and household income all influence exposure and the ability to stay safe.

Why this matters now

Heat is a silent killer. Responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people each year, the impact of heat-related death and illness is rising. In the latest 2026 heatwave in Europe, heat is estimated to have killed nearly 14,000 people in the month of June alone. Heat mortality is higher in older people, those with intersecting vulnerabilities, and is directly linked with inequality. Heat can lead to increasing levels of illness and mental distress, with rippling impacts on services and workplaces. We know also that heat contributes to unsafe working and learning conditions and places immense pressure on transport, energy, water and emergency systems. Tens of thousands of Australians are living in unsafe, insecure or poor-quality housing, managing disabilities, unable to access good public space and services, and experiencing isolation. All are exposed to the impacts of increasing heat. In addition, heat places yet more stress on water, trees and urban ecosystem, further exacerbating potential future heat exposure.

Decisions being made today about housing, urban growth, transport, infrastructure, vegetation and water in cities, towns and neighbourhoods across Australia will determine the thermal conditions inherited by future generations.

Without a justice-focused approach, investment may prioritise places and households that already have the greatest resources. Meanwhile, people who cannot modify a rental property, afford air-conditioning, relocate or avoid outdoor work may remain dangerously exposed.

The challenge is not simply to make cities cooler. It is to ensure that cooling strategies do not deepen inequality, displace communities, intensify surveillance, exacerbate isolation or place further unsustainable pressure on water, land and ecological systems.

To ensure that the urban development and investment decisions made today do not bake in yet more exposure and heat injustice for future generations. A just response must ask:

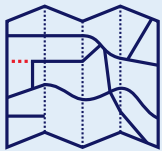
- Who is most exposed?
- Who can afford protection?
- Who benefits from greening and infrastructure investment?
- Whose knowledge shapes decisions?
- What responsibilities do institutions have to people, Country and future generations?

Knowledge for action on heat injustice

Our aim is to establish a long-term, interdisciplinary research and engagement platform that advances fairer responses to heat injustice in cities and towns.

This initiative investigates the **politics of exposure** – how planning, housing, infrastructure, development, income, health, mobility and environmental conditions shape who experiences heat and who can access relief. **The initiative is structured across three focus areas for inquiry and action.**

Our focus areas



1 Governing heat fairly

This stream examines how urban planning, development, infrastructure and adaptation decisions shape exposure to heat and access to cooling. Considering heat as a slow disaster, it looks carefully at the relationship between urbanisation, colonialism, and extractivism to understand the challenge of planning and delivering genuinely safe and sustainable neighbourhoods and homes. Thinking about cooling infrastructures as a civic obligation, it examines how policy responses to urban heat make contradictions and tensions more visible, either exacerbating or ameliorating heat experiences. It examines different governance models being applied across different types of urban places and what thermal inheritance is being baked into today's decisions on future generations.



2 Equity in keeping cool

This stream investigates how living with heat is changing everyday life for diverse kinds of households, workers and communities. A central question is how relative levels of wealth, power, social mobility and relationships shape people's exposure to heat and their capacity to keep cool. These dynamics are present across housing, transportation and mobility, mental and physical health, work and education.



3 Multi-species justice

This stream extends inquiry beyond human experience to consider urban ecosystems and the species sharing our cities and towns. It examines how heat is and will exclude or favour different kinds of species from co-existing in cities and towns and the implications for urban ecosystems in the future. Urban interventions always have large impacts on environment and Country, affecting plants and animals as well as the health of water, soil and air. The goal is to support cities that are places of care for multiple forms of life.



Our approach

Our approach is collaborative, aiming to create useful outputs, tools and datasets for advocacy, policy design, practice, research and education. We are sharing our knowledge through our CUR Heat Library, a compilation of high-quality resources to support decision-makers and advocacy groups with immediate knowledge about what matters. Our collaborative approach builds relationships across health, housing, planning, caring for Country, climate justice, and infrastructure investment. We build advocacy capacity through our Thought Leadership Series and co-designing tools and projects with partners.

About the Centre for Urban Research

The Centre for Urban Research is a dynamic hub for interdisciplinary research on these critical issues. Through our research, we aim to contribute new knowledge and understanding that is grounded in real-world problems, critical in orientation and collaborative in our approach to making and sharing knowledge. Our expertise spans housing, land and place, urban planning and transport, climate action, urban environments, resilience and social and spatial justice.

Have an opportunity you'd like to explore? Let's talk

Contact our heat team

Dr Sarah Robertson and Professor Libby Porter at cur@rmit.edu.au.

Use our existing heat research resources

<https://www.rmit.edu.au/research/centres-collaborations/centre-for-urban-research/themes/heat>

