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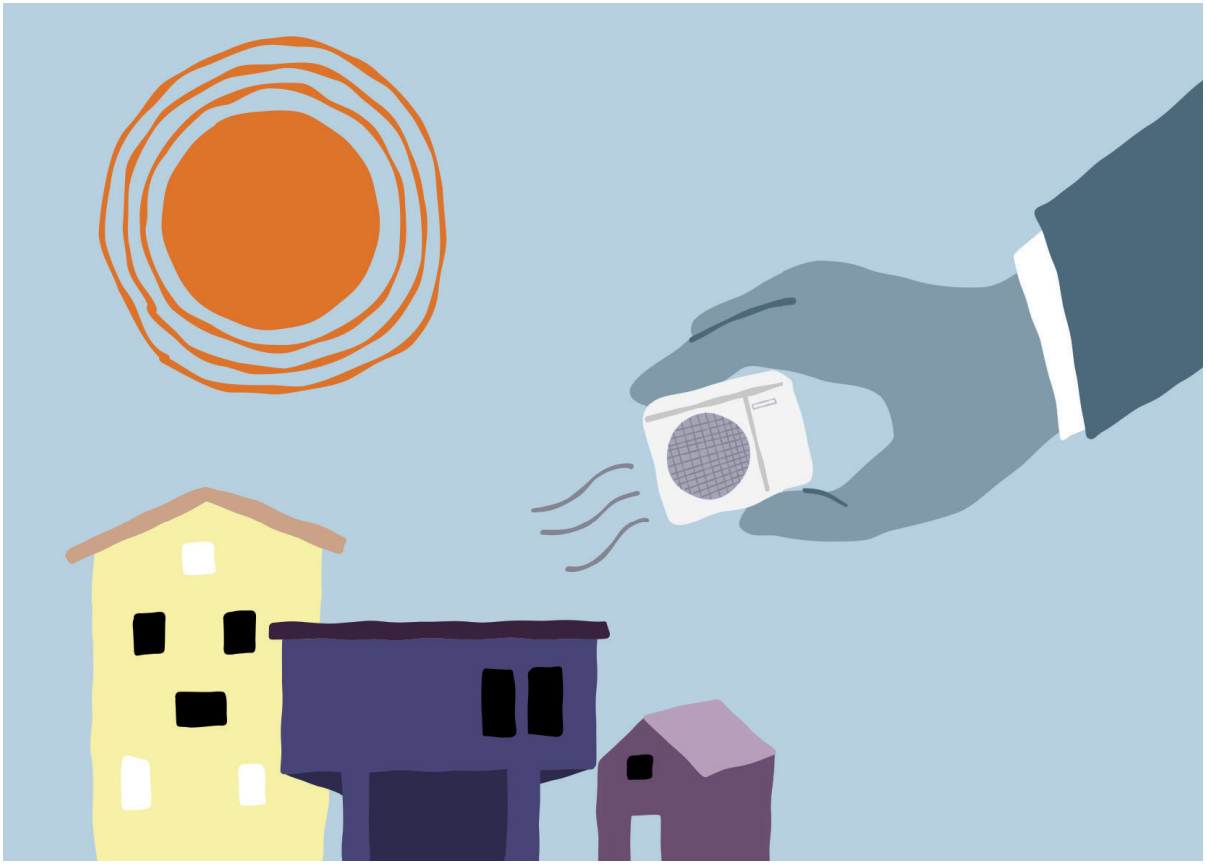
SAJE
STRATEGIC ACTIONS FOR A JUST ECONOMY

A Renters' Right to Cooling

ADDRESSING EXTREME HEAT IN RENTAL HOUSING



BY CHELSEA KIRK

JULY 2025
STUDENT REPORT

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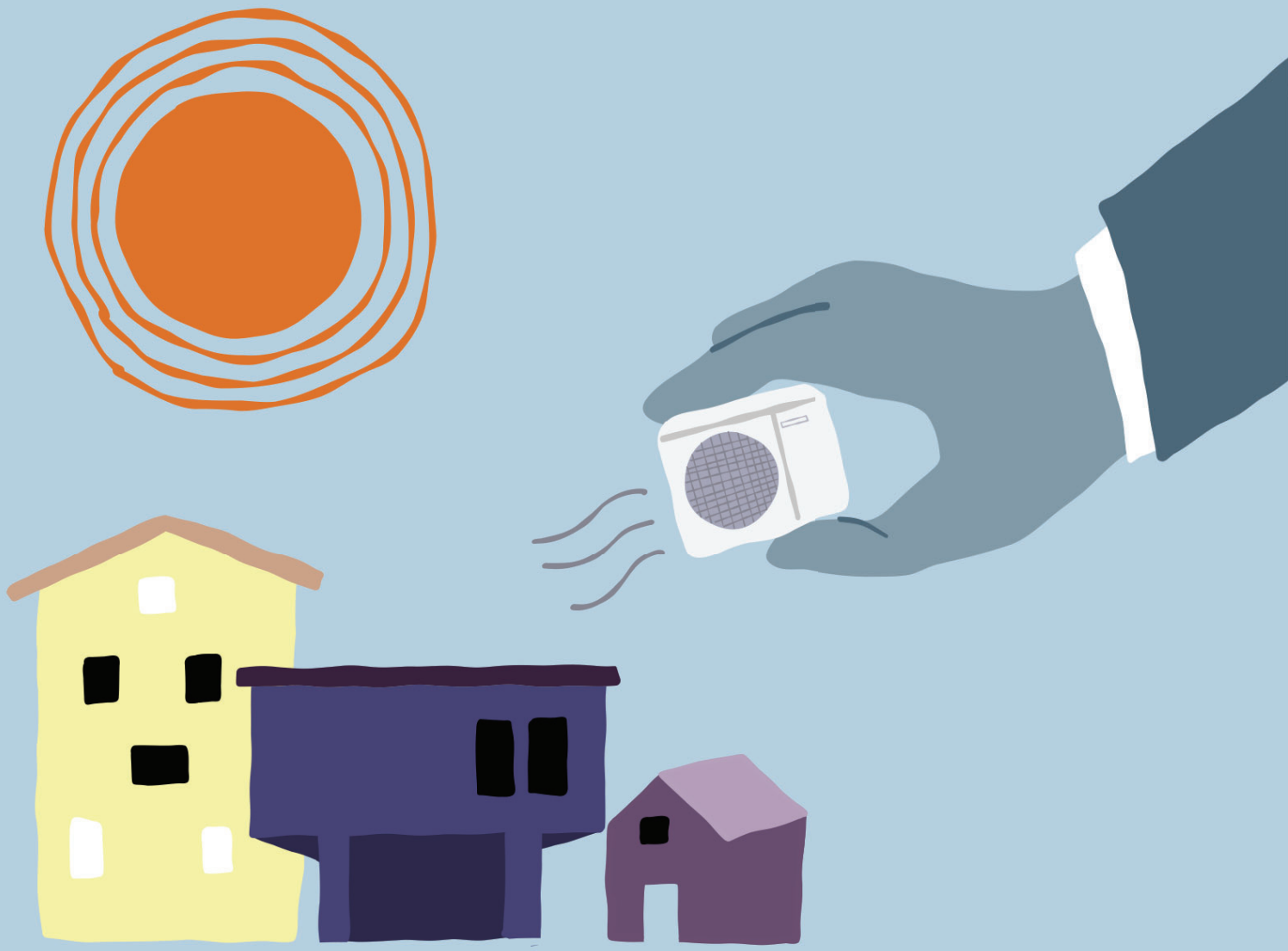

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July 2025

Author
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I am grateful to SAJE Deputy Director of Communications and Development Elizabeth Hamilton for her thoughtful review and editing, and to SAJE Assistant Director of Policy and Advocacy Grace Hut for her research assistance and feedback. I also thank Daniel Carpenter-Gold of the Public Health Law Center for his review. Thanks also go to Allison Kirste, for her invaluable research support, and to SAJE's Climate and the Built Environment team of Jannet Torres, Mariana Paredes-Luna, and Carlos Gonzalez for their time and care in supporting the focus groups that grounded this project in tenant experience.

I also wish to thank the UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation for supporting this work, and the Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. Social Justice Award at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, which helped make this project possible.

About SAJE

SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization in South Los Angeles that builds community power and leadership for economic justice. Founded in 1996, SAJE focuses on tenant rights, healthy housing, and equitable development. We believe that everyone, regardless of income or connections, should have a voice in creating the policies that shape our city, and that the fate of city neighborhoods should be decided by those who dwell there in a manner that is fair, replicable, and sustainable.

Foreword

Edith de Guzman, Cooperative Extension Specialist
UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

As the planet warms, with the majority of its population for the first time in history residing in cities, the stakes of climate adaptation are becoming more urgent.

This is true especially for those with limited freedom to control their physical environment, including those who rent their homes. This report arrives at a critical juncture, offering a necessary correction to how we think about resilience, housing, and equity in a rapidly warming world. Extreme heat is no longer a future threat; it is a present and deadly reality, particularly for the low-income renters who are least equipped to cope with its impacts and too often excluded from the decisions that shape their daily lives.

The debate over air conditioning in rental housing has become a stand-in for a broader reckoning: What do we owe each other in the face of climate change? And whose comfort, health, and safety count when designing policies for the greater good? While the conversation around building retrofits and climate mitigation often centers on energy efficiency, long-term emissions goals, and where responsibility should lie to ensure tenant safety, it often neglects the immediate, lived realities of tenants who endure sweltering, often uninhabitable indoor conditions.

This report does something essential: it centers the voices of renters—those who experience the sharpest edge of extreme heat and yet are given the least say in the solutions. Through direct engagement with tenants, it uncovers a troubling picture of fear, vulnerability, and systemic neglect. But it also reveals clarity and consensus: renters want air conditioning, need it to stay safe, and believe it should be treated as a right—not a luxury.

The insights here challenge us to reframe cooling as a basic standard of habitability, not a bonus amenity. They push policymakers to prioritize health over hesitation, equity over efficiency, and lived experience over abstract analysis. Most of all, they remind us that any climate strategy that does not protect our most vulnerable neighbors will fall far short of what this moment demands.

This report is both a warning and a call to action: we cannot afford to treat cooling as optional. Lives depend on it.

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Tables and Figures

I. Executive Summary

As Los Angeles faces rising temperatures due to climate change, unsafe indoor heat is becoming a critical issue, especially for renters. Average temperatures have increased significantly over the past century, leading to more frequent, longer, and more severe heat waves and posing serious health risks. Data show that extreme heat kills more people annually in the United States than any other natural disaster,[1] with most fatalities occurring indoors due to the absence of effective cooling.[2] Renters are especially vulnerable to heat-related illness and death, especially those with low incomes or leasing agreements that limit them from implementing cooling solutions such as air conditioning (A/C).

What is the best way to address extreme heat in rental housing? Many cities are currently weighing policy options. Yet, policy debates are typically dominated by concerns that deprioritize renters' immediate health and wellbeing. In particular, concerns about A/C are numerous: it will increase utility bills for low-income households, it will be too expensive for property owners to install and maintain, it will worsen climate impacts, and it will strain the already overburdened power grid. These are important considerations, but, as this report demonstrates, they must rank secondary to mitigating the real-time health effects of extreme heat borne by those least equipped to adapt to our rapidly changing climate.

Too often, the voices of working-class tenants are excluded from discussions about policies that directly impact them. This is especially true in the realm of climate resilience; for example, tenants have largely been left out of conversations about decarbonizing residential building stock, even though they live in the buildings targeted for retrofits. The same has been true for cooling mandates. The people shaping cooling policies—many of whom likely enjoy A/C in their own homes—often fail to consider what it's like to live in a sweltering, poorly maintained apartment owned by a landlord who refuses to allow A/C.

There is an urgent need to ensure Los Angeles' working-class tenants can survive extreme indoor heat. These tenants should be included in decisions that will impact the habitability of their homes. To that end, this report centers tenant perspectives about cooling mandates in rental housing by bringing their voices to the policy discourse.

[1] Terri Adams-Fuller, "Extreme Heat Is Deadlier than Hurricanes, Floods and Tornadoes Combined," *Scientific American*, July 1, 2023, scientificamerican.com/article/extreme-heat-is-deadlier-than-hurricanes-floods-and-tornadoes-combined/.
[2] "Heat Hazard Report," National Weather Service, December 5, 2024, weather.gov/media/hazstat/heat23.pdf.

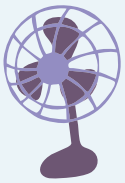
Tenant Perspectives on Extreme Indoor Heat

Living through dangerous levels of indoor heat is common, especially in the summer. Most tenants described their apartments as hotter than the outdoors during heat waves.

The monthly electricity costs associated with A/C are often unaffordable, making tenants hesitant to run A/C units.

Indoor heat makes people sick. Tenants reported physical- and mental-health impacts from extreme heat, including headaches, dizziness, asthma attacks, nosebleeds, anxiety, and heat rashes.

Leaving home to cool down is expensive. Tenants who have tried escaping the heat in their homes by going to cafes, gyms, or the beach said the cost of food, gas, and parking quickly add up.



Most in-home cooling solutions are ineffective. Portable and window A/C units often fail to cool entire apartments. Central air is the only cooling system that consistently keeps households safe and comfortable.

Tenants may turn to foil-covered windows, ice packs, wet clothes, fans, and other creative strategies—but these DIY cooling strategies are insufficient.

Many landlords disallow window A/C units, citing electrical or aesthetic concerns.

Tenants overwhelmingly want A/C. Despite the costs associated with running it, nearly everyone said they would use A/C if it were provided and believe it should be a legal requirement.

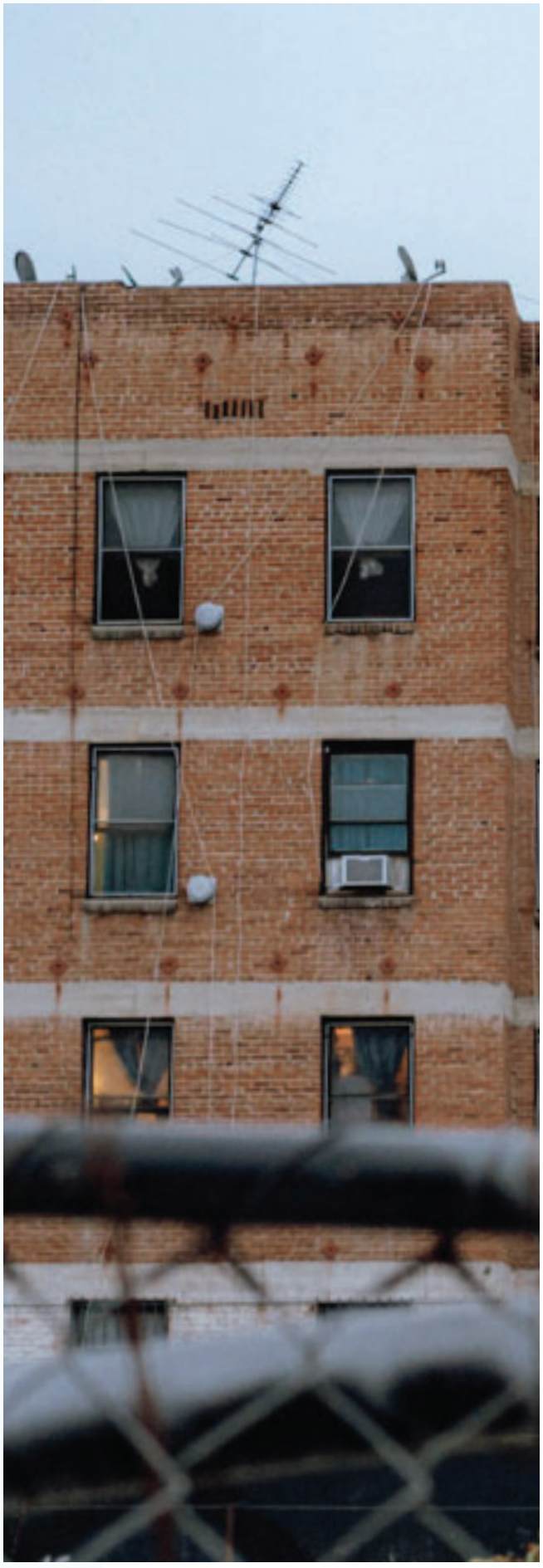
Some tenants are afraid to ask for A/C, worried it might trigger rent increases, harassment, or eviction.

II. Methodology

This report takes a qualitative approach to assessing extreme heat conditions in rental housing. It begins with a review of academic and gray literature on effective interventions for maintaining safe indoor temperatures. The report then examines the rental housing cooling policy landscape in the United States. Finally, it details findings from four bilingual in-person focus groups (N=58) SAJE organized to learn from tenant perspectives and ground our policy recommendations in the lived experiences of those most affected by extreme indoor heat and inadequate access to in-home cooling.

The four focus groups were designed to fill a gap in climate policy research by providing a space for tenants to articulate how indoor heat impacts their daily lives and what mitigation strategies they believe are necessary. The focus groups took place on August 7, 2024 (N=21), March 17, 2025 (N=9), April 7, 2025 (N=11), and April 14, 2025 (N=17). Three focus groups were held at SAJE's office in South Los Angeles, and one was conducted in the parking lot of an apartment building in Echo Park. Each focus group was audio recorded and transcribed. During the focus groups, notes were taken in English and Spanish to ensure accurate capture of participant input across languages. Focus group participants were compensated with $75 Visa gift cards for their time.

To supplement the qualitiative research, SAJE administered a survey via a Google Form to each focus group participant to capture demographic data, their experiences with extreme heat in their homes, and their opinions about potential cooling mandates. The survey was completed by 53 of the 58 participants. All focus group participants signed a consent form, and their names have been pseudonymized here.



III. Indoor Cooling in a Changing Climate

Extreme indoor heat is becoming an increasingly urgent issue for tenants in Los Angeles, as average temperatures in the city continue to rise due to climate change. The average annual maximum and minimum temperatures have increased over the past century by 5°F and 4.2°F, respectively,[3] and the city is projected to experience 26 days above 92.6°F by 2050.[4] Average temperatures in Los Angeles are expected to rise by between 3.6°F and 4.8°F over the next 100 years, depending on the neighborhood.[5]

Los Angeles is also experiencing longer and more frequent heat waves, which pose severe risks to public health. Extreme heat kills more people annually in the United States than any other natural disaster,[6] and nearly half of fatalities related to heat occur indoors.[7] Numerous analyses of past extreme-heat events demonstrate the greatest risk factor in heat-related fatalities is the lack of access to A/C.[8]

Low-income people of color are disproportionately burdened by the effects of climate change and extreme heat.[9] A lack of indoor cooling exacerbates existing health risks, especially for vulnerable populations like children and seniors.[10] For tenants, the situation is especially dire, as many do not have access to adequate cooling options.[11] Access to in-home A/C is far less prevalent among renters than homeowners.[12] Landlords sometimes prohibit tenants from installing A/C units, leaving those residents particularly vulnerable during heat waves. In Los Angeles, the average extreme heat day[13] leads to upwards of 1,500 excess emergency room visits due to heat-related illnesses, the majority of which are concentrated in low-income areas in the city, where residents are more likely to rent.[14]

[3] Arbi Tamrazian, Steve LaDochy, Josh Willis, and William C. Patzert, "Heat Waves in Southern California: Are They Becoming More Frequent and Longer Lasting?," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 70, no. 1 (2008): 59–69, doi.org/10.1353/pcg.0.0001.
[4] "Risk Snapshot: Climate Change Hazard Ratings for Los Angeles, CA," ClimateCheck, climatecheck.com/california/los-angeles, accessed May 27, 2025.
[5] Sungyop Kim, Fengpeng Sun, and Clara Irazábal, "Planning for Climate Change: Implications of High Temperatures and Extreme Heat for Los Angeles County (CA)," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 87, no. 1 (2021): 34–44, doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1788415.
[6] Adams-Fuller, "Extreme Heat."
[7] Anna Kutz, "Nearly Half of Heat Deaths Happen at Home: Data," *The Hill*, June 25, 2024, thehill.com/changing-america/sustainability/environment/4739861-nearly-half-of-heat-related-deaths-happen-at-home-data/.
[8] Yoonjung Ahn and Christopher K. Uejio, "Modeling Air Conditioning Ownership and Availability," *Urban Climate* 46 (December 2022): 101322, doi.org/10.1016/j.uclim.2022.101322.
[9] Bill M. Jesdale, Rachel Morello-Frosch, and Lara Cushing, "The Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Heat Risk–Related Land Cover in Relation to Residential Segregation," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 121 (2013): 811–17, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23694846/.
[10] Ahn and Uejio, "Modeling Air Conditioning Ownership."
[11] Mathilda Scott, Sara E. Grineski, Timothy W. Collins, and Daniel E. Adkins, "Climate Gaps: Disparities in Residential Air Conditioning Access across Ten US Metropolitan Areas," *Applied Geography* 176 (March 2025), doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2025.103537.
[12] Rebecca Mann and Jenny Schuetz, "As Extreme Heat Grips the Globe, Access to Air Conditioning Is an Urgent Public Health Issue," Brookings Institution, July 25, 2022, brookings.edu/articles/as-extreme-heat-grips-the-globe-access-to-air-conditioning-is-an-urgent-public-health-issue/.
[13] An average extreme heat day typically refers to temperatures above 92°F, but the study this statistics refers to does not specify a temperature threshold.
[14] Lolita Lopez, "Emergency Room Visits Increase in California on Excessive Heat Days," NBC Los Angeles, July 21, 2023, nbclosangeles.com/news/local/emergency-room-visits-increase-in-california-on-excessive-heat-days/3192019/.

Addressing Extreme Indoor Heat with A/C

During extreme-heat events, the prevailing guidance is to remain indoors in air-conditioned spaces. The American Red Cross advises: "If you do not have A/C or if there is a power outage, find locations where you can stay cool."[15] Studies show prolonged exposure to extreme heat significantly increases the risk of hyperthermia, which can manifest as heat exhaustion or heat stroke. When the body's core temperature rises beyond 104°F, there is risk of heat stroke, organ failure, and death.[16] Research shows that people without A/C are over 50% more likely to face these types of heat-related health issues or hospitalization than those with room A/C (e.g., a window unit, portable unit, or wall-mounted unit).[17] In fact, a 2016 study found that, after 1960, the fatality rate on days when the temperature exceeded 80°F declined by 85%, likely due to the widespread adoption of residential A/C over that decade.[18]

Research shows that people without A/C are over 50% more likely to face these types of heat-related health issues or hospitalization than those with room A/C.

The 1995 Chicago heat wave is an important case study. This heat wave, one of the most devastating environmental disasters in the history of the city, spanned July 12 to July 16, 1995. Temperatures soared to over 100°F, with the heat index[19] reaching as high as 126°F. Over five days, 739 people died from conditions caused by the heat. The majority of victims were elderly, low-income residents who either lacked access to A/C or could not afford to use it.[20] A close study of this heat event revealed that a working air conditioner was the most significant protective factor, associated with an 80% reduction in the risk of death from heat and health conditions exacerbated by heat.[21]

The type of A/C a household has matters. A 2022 study showed that people with no A/C had a 50% higher risk of heat-related illness than people with window unit A/C, and that central A/C was most effective at protecting residents from heat-related illness.[22] In general, central A/C has been found to offer better protection against heat-related illness than window-or wall-mounted systems.[23] In fact, renters who live in homes equipped only with window or portable A/C units often experience issues similar to those who live without any A/C at all.[24]

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[15] Extreme Heat Safety, American Red Cross, accessed May 30, 2025, redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/extreme-heat-safety.html?srsltid=AfmBOopC_r1hWAV_kgb5iSgDAwxxg3FJZiG5iWrbM9AB7vgFQxRtIKCx.

[16] Crystell Harty, "Hyperthermia's Heat Stroke Risk: Understanding The Dangers," *Medshun*, October 29, 2024, medshun.com/article/can-hyperthermia-lead-to-heat-stroke.

[17] Yasushi Honda, "RE: 'Air-Conditioning and Mortality in Hot Weather,'" *American Journal of Epidemiology* 142, no. 1 (July 1995): 99, academic.oup.com/aje/article-abstract/142/1/99/193283?redirectedFrom=fulltext.

[18] Alan Barreca, Karen Clay, Olivier Deschenes, Michael Greenstone, and Joseph S. Shapiro, "Adapting to Climate Change: The Remarkable Decline in the US Temperature-Mortality Relationship over the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Political Economy* 124, no. 1 (2016), journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/684582.

[19] The heat index measures both air temperature and humidity to communicate how conditions feel to the human body.

[20] Jan C. Semenza, et al., Heat-Related Deaths during the July 1995 Heat Wave in Chicago," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 335, no. 2 (1996): 84–90, doi.org/10.1056/NEJM199607113350203.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ahn and Uejio, "Modeling Air Conditioning Ownership."

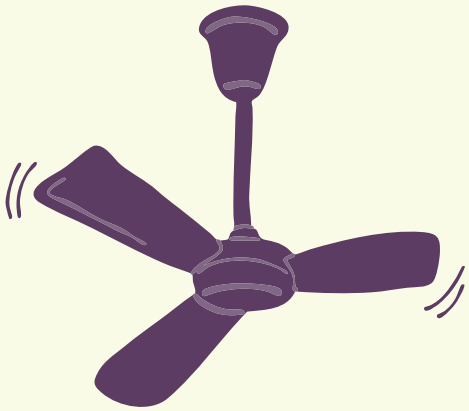
[23] Jacqueline E. Cardoza, et al., "Heat-Related Illness Is Associated with Lack of Air Conditioning and Pre-Existing Health Problems in Detroit, Michigan, USA: A Community-Based Participatory Co-Analysis of Survey Data," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17," no. 16 (2020): 5704, doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17165704.

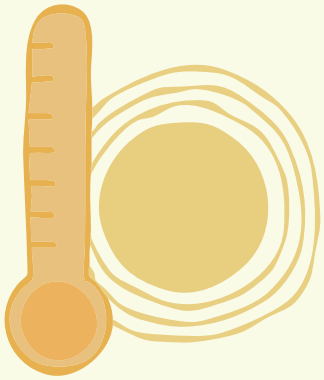
[24] A. Quinn, P. Kinney, and J. Shaman, "Predictors of Summertime Heat Index Levels in New York City Apartments," *Indoor Air* 27, no. 4 (2017): 840–51, doi.org/10.1111/ina.12367.

Non-A/C Cooling Strategies and Their Efficacy

Fans

Ceiling fans are insufficient for mitigating the effects of extreme indoor heat, according to studies.[25] Ceiling fans do not lower ambient temperature; rather, they circulate air, which can create a sensation of cooling but offers limited relief during extreme-heat events. In fact, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises against using fans when the temperature rises above 90°F,[26] as the circulating air can have the effect of a convection oven and cause overheating and dehydration.[27]



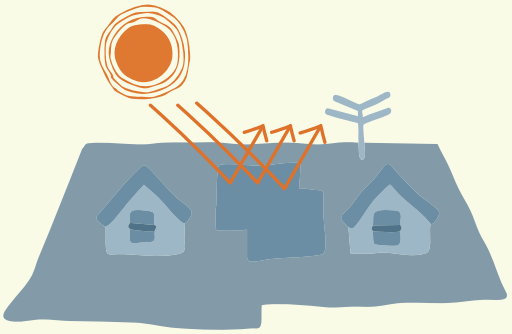


Weatherization

A 2024 study focused on Los Angeles found that "cooling—not weatherization—ensures access to livable indoor conditions."[28] To evaluate the impact of insulation and other passive measures on indoor heat exposure, researchers used an energy model to simulate 50,000 representative homes across the city. They tested multiple upgrade scenarios, including improved insulation, air sealing, and cool roofs in homes with and without A/C. The results showed that insulation and air-tightness upgrades did not reduce indoor temperatures in homes without A/C. In fact, these measures often increased heat retention, leading to more hours spent in unsafe temperatures, proving that weatherization can make conditions more dangerous when not used along with A/C.[29]

[25] Yasmin Romitti, Ian Sue Wing, Keith R. Spangler, and Gregory A. Wellenius, "Inequality in the Availability of Residential Air Conditioning across 115 US Metropolitan Areas," *PNAS Nexus* 1, no. 4 (2022), 210, academic.oup.com/pnasnexus/article/1/4/pgac210/6713629.
[26] "About Heat and Your Health," Centers for Disease Control, June 25, 2024, cdc.gov/heat-health/about/index.html.
[27] Daniel Gagnon and Craig G. Crandall, "Electric Fan Use during Heat Waves: Turn Off for the Elderly?," *Temperature* (Austin) 4, no. 2 (2017):104–06, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5489014/#:~:text=Public%20health%20agencies%20generally%20discourage,dry%20heat%20gain%20and%20dehydration.
[28] Noah Sandoval, et al., "Cooling—Not Weatherization—Ensures Access to Livable Indoor Conditions for Residential Buildings in Los Angeles," American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, 2024 Summer Study on Energy Efficiency in Buildings, aceee.org/sites/default/files/proceedings/ssb24/assets/attachments/20240722160736140_ccf0f65d-68c5-489b-8985-22d6cc576e8d.pdf.
[29] Ibid.

Reflective Cool Roofs



Reflective cool roofs are coated with a special material designed to reflect sunlight away and minimize heat absorption, which helps to keep the building cool. Data from the Environmental Protection Agency shows these roofs can lower indoor temperatures in buildings without A/C by between 2°F and 6°F.[30] In some cases—especially in top-floor units that typically retain the most heat—this reduction can be as much as 10°F.[31] Reflective cool roofs do not eliminate the need for A/C, but they can reduce its workload: A/C usage may drop by about 20% when less heat enters from the roof.[32]

Still, cool roofs are not enough to mitigate dangerous indoor temperatures during extreme-heat events. Research on 13 heat-vulnerable multifamily buildings in El Monte, California, found that while passive retrofits like cool roofs help reduce indoor heat and energy costs, they do not prevent dangerous temperatures during heatwaves.[33] In units without A/C, indoor temperatures reached unsafe levels, although the cool roofs did cut the number of hours in the danger zone nearly in half.[34]

Tree Shade

A 2021 TreePeople study conducted in Southeast Los Angeles County found that mature trees can modestly but meaningfully reduce indoor temperatures in homes. For the study, seven homes, selected based on their varying levels of tree canopy, were outfitted with sensors in bedrooms, living rooms, and outdoor eaves. The study collected temperature data from each home over 76 days during late summer and early fall. On days when temperatures reached over 90°F, homes with moderate to high tree canopy cover were on average 1.1°F cooler in bedrooms and 1°F cooler in living rooms than homes with little or no tree canopy cover. The study's authors note that a 1°F reduction in indoor temperature could reduce heat-related deaths by between 10% and 20% in low-income areas.[35]

[30] "Using Cool Roofs to Reduce Heat Islands," United States Environmental Protection Agency, February 27, 2025, epa.gov/heatislands/using-cool-roofs-reduce-heat-islands#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20in%20non%2Dair,2.2%20to%205.9%C2%B0F.
[31] "Frequently Asked Questions: Cool Roofs," Natural Resources Defense Council, May 2020, nrdc.org/sites/default/files/india-cool-roofs-faq-20200527.pdf.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Sang Hoon Lee, et al., "Assessment of Energy and Thermal Resilience Performance to Inform Climate Mitigation of Multifamily Buildings in Disadvantaged Communities," *Sustainable Cities and Society* 104 (May 2024): 105319, sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2210670724001471?via%3Dihub.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Edith de Guzman and Alan Barreca, "Evaluating the Impacts of Trees on Residential Thermal Conditions in Los Angeles Using Community Science," UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability and Tree People, 2021, treepeople.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/evaluating-the-impacts-of-trees-on-residential-thermal-conditions-in-los-angeles-using-community-science.pdf.

Cooling Centers

During extreme-heat days, local governments often open cooling centers, or air-conditioned spaces where households can seek refuge. These may be dedicated public facilities or designated public institutions such as libraries, recreation centers, or senior centers; in some cases, private businesses like malls or movie theaters also serve this function. In Los Angeles, 64% of public library branches designated as cooling centers on extreme heat days see a significant uptick in visitors, especially unhoused and elderly residents, suggesting these centers are a crucial public resource.[36]

However, research examining the efficacy of cooling centers in Arizona and Los Angeles has identified two major barriers to use: limited hours of operation and distance.[37] Most centers operate only during standard, 9:00 a.m to 5:00 p.m. business hours, leaving heat-affected residents with no options for evenings and overnight. During a 2024 heatwave, Los Angeles' cooling centers were open from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.,[38] and officials also directed residents to public libraries, many of which were closed on weekends or had limited hours.[39]

There are fewer than a dozen dedicated "augmented cooling centers" for the more than 4,751 square miles of Los Angeles County, which means most residents—particularly those without cars—cannot access them. One study found that dedicated cooling centers in Los Angeles County serve just 3% of households.[40] This is especially true for residents who depend on public transportation, the majority of whom are low-income[41] and are disproportionately affected by extreme heat. Only 26% of Los Angeles bus stops have shade, and neighborhoods with the least street and sidewalk tree canopy coincide with the highest heat exposure and lowest incomes.[42]

During heat waves, designated cooling centers such as public libraries and private, commercial spaces are more accessible, serving 11% and 80% of households, respectively. However, they typically lack on-site services to address heat-related illness.

[36] Diana Alcocer, et al., "Identifying and Addressing Heat Inequities in the City of Los Angeles," UCLA MURP Comprehensive Planning Project conducted in collaboration with the L.A. City Climate Emergency Mobilization Office, 2023, escholarship.org/uc/item/9sf0b27b.
[37] Amudalat Ajasa, "Cooling Centers Save Lives in a Heat Wave—If You Can Get There," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2023, washingtonpost.com/weather/2023/07/15/cooling-centers-limitations-heatwaves-cities/.
[38] Los Angeles Emergency Management Department, "Updates. City of Los Angeles," emergency.lacity.gov/updates, accessed May 27, 2025.
[39] "Locations and Hours," Los Angeles Public Library, lapl.org/branches, accessed September 2024.
[40] Andrew M. Fraser, Mikhail V. Chester, and Emily Bondank, "Household Accessibility to Heat Refuges: Residential Air Conditioning, Public Cooled Space, and Walkability," *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science* 44, no. 6 (2016), 1036–55, doi.org/10.1177/0265813516657342.
[41] Chelsea Kirk, "The Road to Transit Equity: The Case for Universal Fareless Transit in Los Angeles," Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, May 2023, saje.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SAJE-The-Road-to-Transit-Equity.pdf.
[42] Pilar Marrero, "In Los Angeles, Shade Most Often Goes to the Privileged," *Knock LA*, April 3, 2024, knock-la.com/in-los-angeles-shade-most-often-goes-to-the-privileged/.

IV. U.S. Policy Responses to Extreme Indoor Heat

Lack of cooling in rental units is a national concern, fueled by a series of recent, tragic heat-related fatalities. In Oregon, at least 96 people died during the 2021 Pacific Northwest heat dome, when temperatures soared as high as 121°F;[43] many of the fatalities were people at home alone without A/C.[44] The following year, Oregon passed Senate Bill 1536, granting renters the right to have cooling in their homes;[45] landlords can no longer impose restrictions on tenants' ability to install portable A/C units. In Chicago in 2022, the heat-related deaths of three elderly women in a senior living facility without A/C led to citywide regulations mandating cooling in large condominiums and senior housing.[46] Baton Rouge, Louisiana, began requiring A/C in rentals in 2023, after a 67-year-old woman died in her apartment—without A/C—in 103°F heat.[47]

Other cities have proactively mandated indoor cooling regulations for rental housing to prevent such tragedies. In summer 2024, a New York city councilmember proposed setting an indoor air temperature threshold for rental housing, and, in April 2025, Austin's city council adopted a requirement for cooling equipment capable of keeping indoor temperatures below 85°F in rental units.

This wave of policy responses reflects a growing recognition that cooling in rental housing is not a luxury, but a necessity. Governments have developed a variety of approaches to ensure indoor temperatures are regulated, from requiring landlords to provide A/C units to passing "right to cool" laws that give tenants the legal right to install their own cooling equipment, even if landlords won't provide it (see Table 1). The majority of ordinances—adopted in at least 10 cities—require active cooling[48] in all rooms, some rooms, or during the hottest part of the year. Some cities have set an indoor maximum air temperature landlords must maintain using either refrigerated air or evaporative cooling, with standards ranging from 80°F to 88°F depending on the climate and cooling method. Other locales, like Oregon and Clark County, Nevada, have taken a more forward-looking approach, requiring functional cooling such as portable A/C, heat pumps, or central A/C in all new residential construction.

[43] Monica Samayoa, Pacific Northwest Heat Wave Was a Freak, 10,000-Year Event, Study Finds," Oregon Public Broadcasting, September 28, 2022, opb.org/article/2022/09/28/pacific-northwest-heat-wave-2021-oregon-summer-weather-heat-dome-climate-change/.
[44] Karen A. McKinnon and Isla R. Simpson, "How Unexpected Was the 2021 Pacific Northwest Heatwave?," *Geophysical Research Letters* 49, no. 18 (2022), agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1029/2022GL100380.
[45] "Oregon Bill to Help Renters Get Air Conditioners for Extreme Heat Passes Senate," *The Oregonian*, March 2, 2022, oregonlive.com/politics/2022/03/oregon-bill-to-help-renters-get-air-conditioners-in-extreme-heat-passes-senate.html.
[46] Rebecca Redelmeier, "Inside Chicago's Effort to Protect Tenants' Right to Cool Air," *Next City*, July 21, 2022, nextcity.org/urbanist-news/inside-chicagos-effort-to-protect-tenants-right-to-cool-air.
[47] Tristyn Turner, "After Woman Died in Hot Apartment, Baton Rouge Councilman Wants to Mandate A/C at Rental Properties," WBRZ, July 10, 2023, wbrz.com/news/woman-dies-in-apartment-without-air-conditioning-metro-council-to-consider-law-changes-surrounding-rental-properties/.
[48] "Active cooling" refers to mechanical systems such as A/C, while "passive cooling" refers to nonmechanical processes such as ventilation, insulation, or shade.

Table 1. Cooling Policies in the U.S.

Mandates Active Cooling

Austin, TX	Requires property owners to install A/C capable of maintaining indoor temperatures 15° cooler than outside temperatures, not to exceed 85°F.
Baton Rouge, LA	Rental units must be equipped with A/C that can cool each bedroom to at least 80°F.
Chicago, IL	Senior living facilities and new and existing residential buildings over 80 ft. tall or with more than 100 units must have cooling in at least one indoor common space. Cooling equipment must be operational when the heat index exceeds 80°F. Residential buildings that are not senior living facilities must have A/C in at least one indoor common space.
Dallas, TX	Requires property owners to provide refrigerated air from April 1 to November 1. Alternatively, A/C must maintain a room temperature at least 15°F cooler than the outside temperature but no higher than 85°F. If outside temperatures surpass 110°F, the code requires at least one habitable room to be 85°F or cooler.
Montgomery County, MD	Landlords must supply and maintain A/C, either through individual units or a central system, to ensure an indoor temperature of 80°F or lower from June 1 to September 30. Exceptions to the policy include detached single-family homes and units located on a site listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
Palm Springs, CA	Requires property owners to provide A/C to maintain a maximum temperature of 80°F in habitable rooms.
Phoenix, AZ	Sets maximum temperatures for habitable rooms at 86°F for rental units with evaporative cooling and 82°F for rental units with A/C.
Tempe, AZ	Sets maximum temperatures for habitable rooms at 88°F for rental units with evaporative cooling at 82°F for rental units with A/C.
Tucson and South Tucson, AZ	A/C must be capable of keeping ambient temperatures at or below at 82°F. Evaporative coolers must be capable of producing ambient temperatures at or below 86°F.

Establishes Indoor Maximum Air Temperature

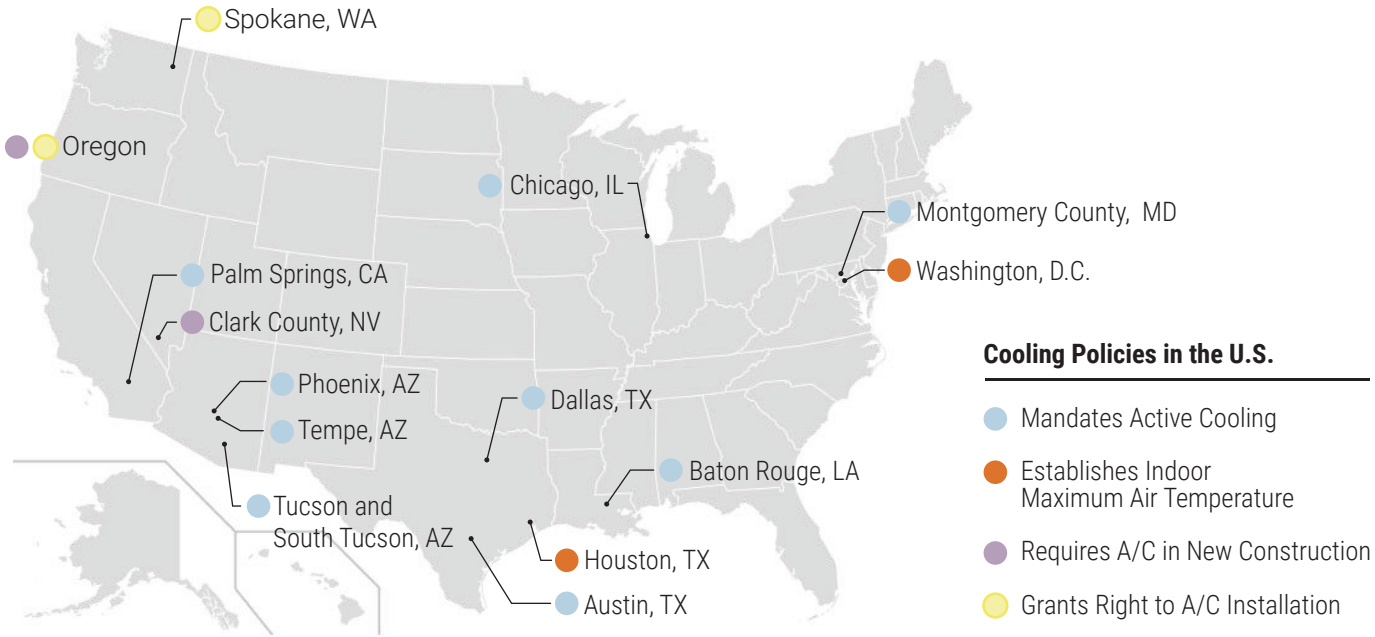
Houston, TX	In each habitable space, if window screens are not provided as required, landlords must provide and maintain refrigerated air equipment capable of keeping the indoor temperature 20° lower than the outside temperature or a maximum of 80°F, whichever is warmer.
Washington, D.C.	Landlords must maintain indoor temperatures at least 15° cooler than outside temperatures if A/C is included in the lease. A/C units must be inspected annually, and the inspection records must be filed with the DC Department of Buildings.

Requires A/C in New Construction

Clark County, NV	Residential units built after February 3, 2019, must include heating and cooling systems that maintain interior temperatures between 68°F and 85°F.
Oregon	Residential units built after April 1, 2024, must have adequate cooling (such as portable A/C, central A/C, or heat pump) in at least one habitable room. The state will create programs to distribute A/Cs and filters to those in need and establish a rebate fund for heat-pump installations.

Grants Right to A/C Installation

Oregon	Landlords cannot restrict tenants from using portable cooling devices between May and September.
Spokane, WA	Landlords cannot restrict tenants from using portable cooling devices year round.



Los Angeles' Proposed Cooling Policies

Neither Los Angeles City nor County have cooling policies for rental housing. California state law outlines minimum habitability standards for rental housing, including access to water, electricity, and heat, but it does not mandate cooling equipment.

In 2024, Los Angeles County proposed capping indoor air temperatures at 82°F in rental housing in unincorporated areas. This would require landlords to ensure all habitable rooms remain at or below that temperature threshold. This policy is non-prescriptive: rather than mandating specific cooling equipment, it would require property owners to implement whatever measures—active or passive—they deem able to meet the standard. This might include A/C, air sealing, or fans. Landlords would be given a deadline to bring their properties into compliance.

In 2022, the Los Angeles City Council also introduced a motion to require cooling apparatuses in rental housing, but the effort has stalled without adoption.

[49] Cal. Civ. Code § 1941.1 leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?sectionNum=1941.1.&lawCode=CIV.

V. Focus Groups: What Do Renters Want?

On a hot Wednesday evening in August 2024, 21 renters gathered at SAJE in South Los Angeles to share their struggles with extreme heat. South Los Angeles residents are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change and face unique hardships coping with extreme heat in their homes. In terms of heat-related illnesses, the area is one of the hardest-hit in the city, experiencing the highest rates of emergency room visits on extreme-heat days. Among the additional challenges: a quarter of residents in the area live in poverty, tree canopy is sparse—just 5% to 7% of the area is covered, compared to the citywide average of 21%—and rates of diseases including lung cancer, stroke, and diabetes are disproportionately high. South Los Angeles is also plagued by some of the worst air quality in Southern California.

Some focus group participants recalled mornings rushing to cook meals for their families before the peak afternoon heat set in, and nights spent battling insomnia and heat with window fans and wet towels. As Lucia Rios explained, “The only thing I can do is open the doors and take my children to the park. I cannot sleep or rest.” Teresa Marquez, who has lived in her apartment for 26 years, added that her landlord refused to allow her to install an A/C unit, fearing damage to the walls. Others in the group described a season spent not in search of leisure but survival: “Right here I am happy and cool,” said Natalia Cordero, gesturing to the air-conditioned space where the meeting was held. “But as I go to my home, it is another story.”

The August 2024 focus group was the first of four; three others were conducted in March and April 2025. Although the weather was cooler in those later months, conversations about extreme heat took on an urgency, as participants were dreading another summer spent enduring unsafe heat. "I'm thinking—oh my goodness, the summer is coming, and it's a moment of suffering," said Maribel Reyes. "I sleep with ice packs on my feet," said Sandra Morales. "Nothing helps. It feels like an oven. Even the water from the tap comes out boiling…it's horrible." Morales, who has lived in her rental unit for a decade, has two portable A/C units—but her landlord warned her the building's electrical grid couldn't handle both. "You have to choose your battle," she said. "It's either in the bedroom or the living room—but not both. And then the power goes out." Her child develops heat rashes. Her fridge stops making ice. "My oldest won't go to the apartment at all—he'd rather stay with my parents. My youngest can't express what he's feeling. To him, this is normal."

Nearly all focus group participants—except for two who reported having central A/C and one other who reported feeling comfortable using only a fan—described difficulties enduring extreme indoor heat in rental housing ill-equipped for heat waves. Participants in households where A/C was broken, inadequate, or unavailable described an oppressive heat that began early in the afternoon and lingered through the night.They described suffocating indoor temperatures, often worse than conditions outdoors. "You cannot breathe in there," said Morales. Others characterized the heat as inescapable: "The heat goes upstairs where I live, and it's extremely hot…I can't sleep at night, even putting all the windows down," said Diana Perez, who reported taking up to four showers a day to cope. Daniela Cruz referred to summer as "a nightmare," adding, "Even going to sleep is a nightmare." Several participants spoke to the disorienting effects of prolonged exposure to heat: "You're really lazy, you don't want to move, you're wet, you want to take a shower, and the heat doesn't go away," said Patricia Varela.

> "I cannot sleep or rest.
>
> Teresa Marquez

> "Nothing helps. It feels like an oven.
>
> My youngest can't express what he's feeling. To him, this is normal.
>
> You cannot breathe.
>
> Sandra Morales

Focus-Group Demographics

Our four focus groups comprised 58 mostly low-income tenants with long tenures in their rentals. Of the 53 who participated in a follow-up survey, approximately 47% indicated household incomes below $15,000 (Figure 1). Only one participant reported a household income above $75,000, and just four earned more than $50,000 (Figure 1).

Almost a quarter of households included at least one senior, while only one participant reported living with a child under five. Nearly 30% had lived in their homes for more than 20 years; one participant has resided in the same unit for 62 years, since 1963, while another has lived in the same unit for more than four decades (Figure 2). The average rent of participants is $1,345, compared to the city average of $2,745 (Figure 3). Participants reported somewhat limited access to transportation; 49% relied primarily on public transit, compared to 47% who used cars (Figure 4).

Figure 1. Household Income

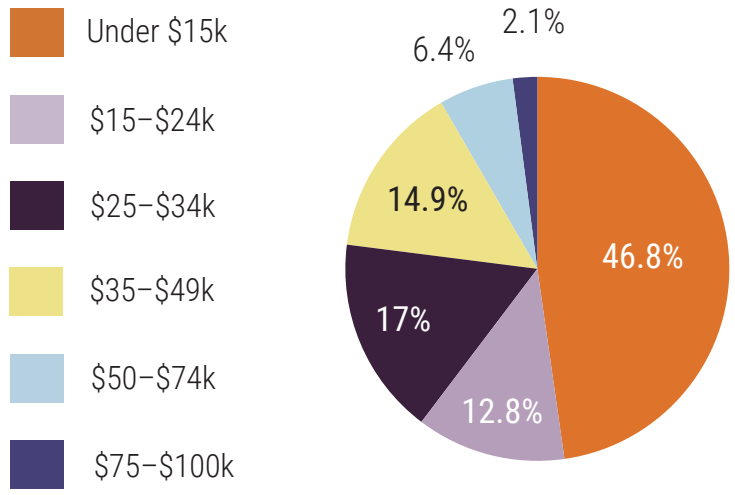


Figure 2. Length of Tenancy

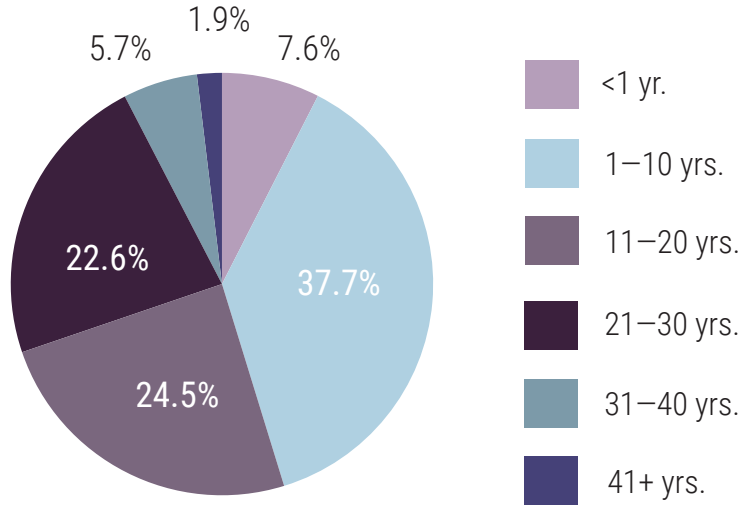


Figure 3. Average Monthly Rent

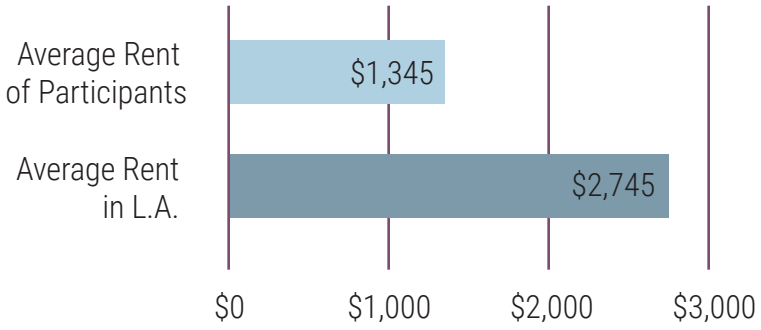
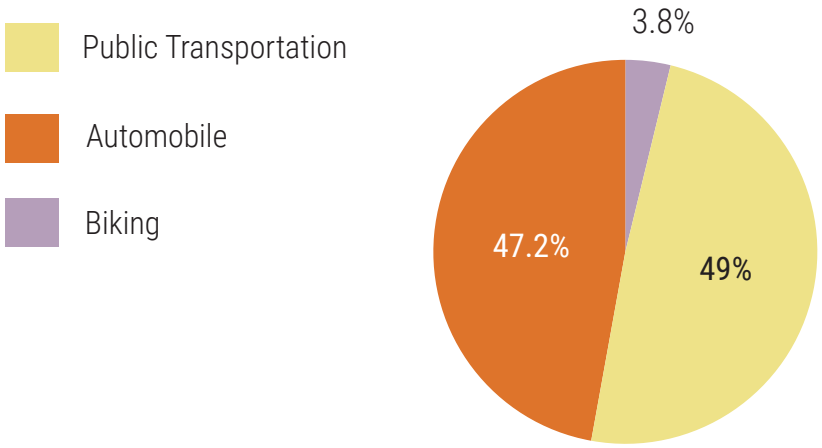
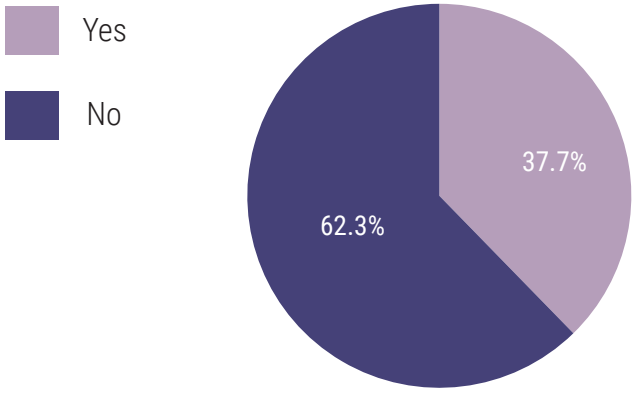


Figure 4. Primary Means of Transportation



Focus group participants' access to cooling equipment in their homes was limited (Figure 5). Only 37% reported having any form of A/C, and just two had central A/C. Of the three individuals who described themselves as "comfortable" during summer, two had central A/C systems. Among those without A/C, 57% cited cost as the primary barrier, while 12% were prohibited by their landlords from installing units.

Figure 5. A/C Access in Home




SECURITY

Common Themes

Across the four focus groups, several themes emerged as critical concerns, including the negative health impacts of extreme indoor heat and the desire for central A/C. Many emphasized that window units and portable A/Cs are insufficient to keep their homes at a healthy temperature during heat waves. Some reported their landlords explicitly prohibit the installation of A/C units, while others feared retaliation or rent increases for requesting A/C. For those living in units where A/C is permitted, the cost of operating it poses a major barrier to use. Participants also described how seeking relief elsewhere—malls, cafes, or other air-conditioned spaces—can be expensive. Many rely on makeshift strategies to cope, hanging blackout curtains, wrapping themselves in wet towels, or altering daily routines to avoid activity during peak heat hours.

The following section explores common themes in greater detail, drawing from tenants' responses to illustrate their experiences dealing with extreme heat in their homes. A summary table of quotes follows to highlight additional dimensions of the findings and offer a fuller picture of how extreme heat is experienced in rental housing.

Households Suffer Negative Health Impacts From Heat

The health effects of extreme indoor heat on focus-group participants were wide-ranging. "Extreme heat gives me a headache, a severe headache," said Rowena Mendoza. Daniela Cruz reported "bloody noses" and constant dizziness. "Last year, the little one got heat rashes," said Sandra Morales, referring to her five-year-old son. "His doctor had to write a note to hand to the landlord." Natalia Cordero said the heat worsened her asthma and skin problems: "It itches and I sweat a lot." For others, the mental-health toll was as acute as the physical harm. "I get mad, I don't want to talk, I don't want to have an attitude," said Darius Benton. "The heat makes it worse." For those with pets, children, or chronic health conditions, the impacts were even more pronounced. "My cat—when it gets really hot—pants," said Diana Perez. "I had to install an A/C because I knew she would die if I didn't." Others described high blood pressure and respiratory issues. "The heat definitely affects me. I suffer from bronchitis," said Laura Esparza. "I feel like I can't breathe with the heat."

> "I feel like I can't breathe with the heat."
>
> Laura Esparza

Tenants Want A/C

Focus group participants consistently talked about wanting A/C, even if it increases their utility bills. "We should force landlords to install A/C," said Carmen Fuentes. In response to the question, "If you were given a free A/C unit, would you use it?," 94% responded affirmatively. "Let me deal with the bill. I'll sell something. I'll make it happen. But don't give me cheap stuff," said Morales, expressing the need for central A/C. Beatriz Moreno agreed: "I would definitely use it.... Probably, there would be more costs in some ways, but I think I'd end up spending less than having to leave the house." Fuentes said, "Ultimately, we're going to pay for the electricity.... At least we can decide how long we'll keep it on." Esparza added, "It would be more expensive, yes, but I would like the electric bill to be reduced. It's really important because we need to be cool." Seventy-six percent of participants stated that the benefits of A/C outweighed the costs. Maribel Reyes noted that A/C is increasingly a necessity for Angelenos: "Twenty-five years ago, we didn't need it here. But now we do—it's a right we should have so we're not suffering."

Window Units and Portable A/Cs Are Not Enough

Focus group participants who reported having portable or window units said it made little difference. "I have a portable A/C. I have two of them," said Morales. "But the power would go off and the landlord would say, 'Well, you have to choose where you want to put it.'" Varela Claudia said, "One unit isn't enough...the bedroom that's near the A/C cools down more, but the last bedroom doesn't get any air." Perez agreed: "It cools down just a small portion of the house.... In the bedroom, I can't sleep at night. It seems like it's 10° hotter than 100°." Morales expressed frustration with the window unit as her only option. "I don't need that $50 A/C unit that I hear landlords like to provide," she said. "I need something that will actually do the job." And for some, these units are incompatible with their homes: "I need it in the living room because the kitchen is generating all the heat," said Viviana Herrera, "but the windows don't allow me to install an A/C."

> "Twenty-five years ago, we didn't need [A/C] here. But now we do—it's a right we should have so we're not suffering.
>
> Maribel Reyes

Cost Burden Is a Major Obstacle to Cooling

Those who did use any type of A/C described it as unaffordable and unsustainable. "When all the A/Cs are turned on and it's really hot...the bill is really high. In a month, it's about $500 to 600," said Carlos Navarro. Norma Castillo was still paying for past bills: "I still owe almost $2,000." Perez, who uses A/C sparingly, said it "seems like a luxury I know I cannot afford." "I had A/C 24/7, but it's really costly," said Pablo Cesar. "We have to find ways to help ourselves." Again and again, participants described choosing between heat or hunger, bills or basic comfort. "We can't be running the A/C all day," said Navarro. "So we have to either pay the A/C or pay for other stuff—the market, food, car payments, insurance." "When the temperature hits 89°, 90°, I turn on the A/C—but not because I want to. Because it's...for my dog. Not because I can afford it," said Varela.

> "We can't be running the A/C all day. So we have to either pay the A/C or pay for other stuff—the market, food, car payments, insurance.
>
> Carlos Navarro

Landlords Ban Tenants from Installing A/C

The renters we spoke to were often actively prevented from using window or portable A/C units. "They don't allow you to have an A/C unit that functions well and sticks out the window," said Reyes. "He said it's aesthetics. It looks bad." "The landlord said the electrical wiring is not suited for air conditioners," said Brenda Trujillo. "Before, they said we cannot put one in the house." Moreno reported that her landlord told her if an A/C unit caused damage, "we are responsible for it," adding, "That's why I opted not to install." Cruz said: "We have to obey those rules because we can't ruin how the apartment looks." In one case, the landlord has been denying A/C installation for over two decades. "I have been suffering for 26 years in the heat," said Marquez. In buildings where new tenants had A/C, long-term residents often went without. "So for old tenants they won't install them at all," said Morales. "The new tenants have a brand new, wonderful A/C."

Fear of Rent Increases and Retaliation Prevents Tenants from Requesting A/C

Many tenants said the biggest barriers to asking for A/C were fear of retaliation, rent increases, and eviction. "Unfortunately, what we know is that when property owners make repairs or additions for our benefit, it causes a rent increase," said Moreno. "So, we prefer to live this way." Esparza said plainly, "Each apartment where they fixed something—they raised the rent $120 a month." Others said making requests can be dangerous. "They get angry because you talk to them and demand that we want A/C," said Varela. "They could try to evict me if they think I'm demanding something," added Silvia Ramos.

> When it's hot, I like to go to a cafe to work. That's gas money, and when you go to a cafe, you have to buy something—coffee, lunch, or something.... It gets expensive.
>
> Daniela Cruz

Staying Cool without A/C Is Expensive

Focus group participants frequently described leaving their homes as a way to cool down, but that this tactic can be financially burdensome. "When it's hot, I like to go to a cafe to work. That's gas money, and when you go to a cafe, you have to buy something—coffee, lunch, or something. I also go to the beach, and there's no free parking. It's $15 or $20 for parking. I have to upgrade to the extended premium gym membership that gives you access to the pool. It gets expensive." said Cruz. Andrea Lopez noted, "I spend money on gas in my car, and I run the A/C.... There's also the cost of food and parking." Reyes said, "When we go to the beach, we have to pay for parking—that's $15 or you can't enter. We buy watermelon, oranges, jamaica, and we go to the beach to cool down. When we're home and don't go out to the beach or park, I try to cook less. That means I have to buy prepared foods, precooked, prepared in restaurants. Those are our excessive costs that we may not be able to afford. If there is no other option, we have to cook at another hour. If you're busy in the morning, you have to cook at midday, when it's hot. I'm thinking—oh my goodness, the summer is coming and it's a moment of suffering." Moreno noted the irony of having to spend money to avoid the heat. Referring to the cost of an A/C unit, she said, "Probably, I'd end up spending less than having to leave the house."

Tenants Often Utilize Creative Cooling Tactics

The renters we spoke with employed every tactic they could think of to make the heat bearable. They described developing around-the-clock survival strategies: opening windows at specific times, avoiding cooking, or laying wet towels on their beds. "To stay cool in the summertime, I put a wet towel down to keep cool at night, and then I put a fan next to the wet towel hitting my skin," said Jorge Sandoval. "I sleep with ice packs on my feet to see if it would help," Morales said. "Honestly, nothing helps." Andre Brooks said, "I get a bucket or put the clothes I want to wear in the sink under cold water—my beanie, my shirt—then I wear a beanie soaked with cold water." Marina Torres added: "I get paper towels, wet them, put them in the freezer, and then rub them on my face." Varela keeps her dog cool by filling the tub with water. And still, the heat often overwhelms these efforts. "You can't do anything," said Perez. "And I don't have any energy to go to a cooling place like the news will tell you to do."

> "It's not a luxury anymore. It's a necessity. Like heat. It should be law.
>
> Maribel Reyes

Landlords Should Provide A/C

Focus group participants questioned the lack of legal requirements mandating A/C in rental housing, particularly in the context of rising temperatures and prolonged extreme heat events. Several participants expressed frustration that landlords, despite regular rent increases, fail to provide basic upgrades or climate adaptations. As Fuentes stated, "They raise the rent every year but won't paint, won't fix anything—and definitely won't install A/C." They described scenarios in which requests for A/C were met with either denial or conditions tied to higher rents. Morales reported, "He's told us for 10 years: if you want A/C, move into a renovated unit and pay more."

Several participants supported the implementation of a formal ordinance that would obligate landlords to provide and install cooling systems. Reyes emphasized, "It's not a luxury anymore. It's a necessity. Like heat. It should be law." "This is not about going to the property owner—it's about it becoming law," echoed Moreno. Reyes added: "A law is a law, and no one can say no. And if they don't follow it, they get fined." She continued, "Landlords should be obligated to install an A/C unit. They should pay for the installation costs, and we shouldn't be charged for those costs because the apartments belong to them—the property owners."

Many participants framed access to A/C as an evolving necessity in a changing climate. "Twenty-five years ago, we didn't need [A/C] here," said Reyes. "But now we do—it's a right we should have, so we're not suffering." Luciana Beltran concluded: "We need to fight for an ordinance that requires A/Cs and thermometers in homes."


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Table 2. Focus Group Themes

Living with extreme heat and inadequate cooling

“You cannot breathe in there, and you have to choose where you have to put the portable A/C—and it’s in the bedroom and you have to sit there all day, or it’s in the living room and you sit there all day.”
— Sandra Morales

“The heat goes upstairs where I live, and it’s extremely hot, and it’s a lot hotter inside my house than it is outside. So I can’t sleep at night, even putting all the windows down and trying to cool off. Sometimes I’ll take four showers in a day.”
— Diana Perez

“My apartment gets really hot because I get the sun the entire day...but in the afternoon it’s so suffocating. I open up [the windows] in the evening, but it’s really hot. It’s unbearable.”
— Laura Esparza

“In the apartment where I live, there are two bedrooms, and there is only A/C in one, there is none in the living room, nor in the kitchen. We have a ceiling fan, but that one is not useful. Because in the afternoon, instead of blowing cold air, it blows hot air.”
— Carmen Fuentes

“Look, for me, it’s just day to day, you’re really lazy, you don’t want to move, you’re wet, you want to take a shower, and the heat doesn’t go away. No matter how much water you drink, you still feel the heat.”
— Patricia Varela

Households suffer negative health impacts from heat

“Extreme heat gives me a headache, a severe headache when it’s summertime—because I have asthma, that’s why I have to take care of that.”
— Rowena Mendoza

“I’ve been diagnosed with high blood pressure—it makes me feel desperate. I get headaches, I get in a bad mood. It’s a feeling of desperation, and I can’t control it.”
— Beatriz Moreno

“I get very dizzy easily, and it’s a health problem. Going to school, going for a walk—I get dizzy or a bloody nose. Every summer is just a nightmare for me.”
— Daniela Cruz

“Last year, the little one got heat rashes. I had to have his doctor write a note to hand to the landlord. This year, I have to put in work for that. Philip is eight years old, and he gets rashes, and he doesn’t know how to express himself that much yet, and to him it’s normal—and I know that it can mess him up.”
— Sandra Morales

“It has affected my skin. It itches and I sweat a lot. I have a problem due to my asthma—when it is too hot, I cannot breathe.”
— Natalia Cordero

Tenants want A/C

“We have to force them to install A/C. Ultimately, we’re going to pay for the electricity and make decisions. At least about how long we're going to keep it on...it’s up to us.”
— Carmen Fuentes

“We don’t have adequate A/C.... We have to find some kind of A/C. For everyone’s health.”
— Ramiro Espinoza

“I believe I need central A/C.... I don’t need that $50 A/C unit that I hear landlords like to provide. I need something that will actually do the job. Let me deal with the bill. I’ll sell something. I’ll make it happen. But don’t give me cheap stuff.”
— Sandra Morales

“For me, I would like an A/C unit to be installed. It would be more expensive, yes, but I would like the electric bill to be reduced. It’s really important because we need to be cool.”
— Laura Esparza

“I would definitely use it.... Probably, there would be more costs in some ways, but I think I’d end up spending less than having to leave the house.”
— Beatriz Moreno

“Twenty-five years ago, we didn’t need [A/C] here. But now we do—it’s a right we should have, so we’re not suffering.”
— Maribel Reyes

Window units and portable A/Cs are not enough

“I have a portable A/C. I have two of them. We put one in the living room and one in the bedroom. But the power would go off and the landlord would say, ‘Well, you have to choose where you want to put it.’ It’s always in the bedroom because of the kids.... It won’t cool down as much in the living room.”
— Sandra Morales

“I have one air conditioner, and it’s in the living room area. It cools down just a small portion of the house.... In the bedroom, I can’t sleep at night. It seems like it’s 10 degrees hotter than 100. I’m literally surviving it.”
— Diana Perez

“We have A/C in one bedroom. If we want the room to be cool, we have to close [the door]. Then the living room and kitchen get the hottest. We can’t open the door or window because the heat gets in—that’s when we struggle the most.”
— Carmen Fuentes

“I have one [A/C], but it’s in the bedroom. So we all go to the bedroom during the summer—our child, my wife, pets. My husband stays in the living room and suffers. I need it in the living room because the kitchen is generating all the heat, but the windows don’t allow me to install an A/C.”
— Viviana Herrera

“I need central A/C. Having an extra A/C unit is not going to help.... I don’t need that $50 A/C unit that I hear landlords like to provide. I need something that will actually do the job.”
— Sandra Morales

Cost burden is a major obstacle to using A/C

“When all the A/Cs are turned on, and it’s really hot—and the fans at the same time—the bill is really high. In a month it’s about $500 to 600.”
— Carlos Navarro

“Despite having an A/C, I only use it when it seems deadly. It’s expensive and difficult to install. It seems like a luxury I know I cannot afford.”
— Diana Perez

“Right now, I still owe money for electricity. For two years, they were charging me an extra $100 each month because of the A/C unit. I still owe almost $2,000.”
— Norma Castillo

“When the heat comes, I turn on the A/C. It’s about $250 for two months. Not affordable. Less money.”
— Niran Saetang

Landlords ban tenants from installing A/C

“They don’t allow you to have an A/C unit that functions well and sticks out the window.... He said it’s aesthetics—it looks bad. The ones that stick out to the street. And the contract says we can’t have anything in the windows.”
— Maribel Reyes

“The landlord where I live doesn’t permit an A/C unit because, supposedly, when the water drips, it ruins the wall, the paint, and if it ruins the wall, then we are responsible for it. That’s why I opted not to install an A/C unit to help cool down the house. Because aside from that, he would make me pay for damage to the wall. My neighbors have asked, too.”
— Beatriz Moreno

“The problem with the building is the landlord said the electrical wiring is not suited for A/Cs.... Before, they said we cannot put one in the house.”
— Brenda Trujillo

“We talked to the landlord, and she said that if we get one, it has to be one of those A/Cs that go outside the window, but she said we can’t install those because it’s against the aesthetics of the building’s exterior. We have to obey those rules because we can’t ruin how the apartment looks—can’t have units that go on the walls either.”
— Daniela Cruz

“The owner did not let me install the A/C unit because he did not want to damage the walls. The walls are old. He sold the property and did not let me install an A/C unit. I have been suffering for 26 years in the heat.”
— Teresa Marquez

Fear of rent increases and landlord retaliation prevents tenants from requesting A/C

“Unfortunately, what we know is that when property owners make repairs or additions for our benefit, it causes a rent increase. That’s a given. So we prefer to live this way, but unfortunately that’s what keeps us in this cycle. I don’t ask for anything. I prefer to fix it myself. Because if I ask the property owner for a repair, it results in a rent increase—and it doesn’t go away. There’s one increase, then another, and we can’t afford it.”
— Beatriz Moreno

“If you fix something in the apartment, they raise your rent. Each apartment where they fixed something—they raised the rent $120 a month.”
— Laura Esparza

“They get angry because you talk to them and demand that we want A/C.”
— Patricia Varela

“They could try to evict me if they think I’m demanding something.”
— Silvia Ramos

Staying cool without A/C is expensive

“I work from home, and when it’s hot, I like to go to a café to work. That’s gas money, and when you go to a cafe, you have to buy something—coffee, lunch, or something. I also go to the beach, and there’s no free parking. It’s $15 or $20 for parking. I have to upgrade to the extended premium gym membership that gives you access to the pool. It gets expensive.”
— Daniela Cruz

“We go to the beach to cool down. We have to pay for parking—that’s $15. We buy watermelon, oranges, jicama. And if we’re home, I have to buy prepared foods—precooked, from restaurants. Those are our excessive costs we may not be able to afford.”
— Maribel Reyes

“I recently started paying for a gym membership. When the heat wave came, we went to the pool. It wasn’t the main reason I bought it, but it’s part of the reason.”
— Liliana Vega

“I spend a lot of money going out to stay fresh. I spend money on gas in my car, and I run the A/C in my car. There’s also the cost of food and parking—because most beaches don’t have free parking.”
— Andrea Lopez

“I would definitely use an A/C unit. I spend $100 when I go out. Maybe that $100, I could put it aside in a jar at home. We’d just need food—we can prepare it. Probably, I’d end up spending less than having to leave the house.”
— Rosa Flores

“So, during the day, we can't go outside because, well, it’s too expensive to buy food, and there's no money. So we prefer to endure the heat.”
— Carmen Fuentes

Tenants often utilize creative cooling tactics

“I use blackout curtains. I close the windows... I put aluminum foil, and it did not make a difference, but I left it there hoping for the best.”

— Sandra Morales

“I put a wet towel down to keep cool at night, and then I put a fan next to the wet towel hitting my skin. I feel fresher.”

— Jorge Sandoval

“Yes, if I cook in the morning, when the heat comes in the afternoon, the heat doesn’t stay inside, and the apartment cools down—so in the evening it’s a little more bearable. I go to McDonald’s when I can’t stand it, or I go to a library where it’s cool to be able to bear the brunt of the heat.”

— Silvia Ramos

“Another thing I do is get a bucket or put the clothes I want to wear in the sink under cold water—my beanie, my shirt—then I wear a beanie soaked with cold water.... I also go to the liquor store and buy a bag of ice. Those are some of my tactics when it’s hot.”

— Andre Brooks

“I get a wet towel and I cover my cat with it and try to keep her inside it.... Daytime, I do foil and cover up the windows, and it helps a little bit—but not that much. So the only thing I can do when everything is the worst, and I’ve taken showers—I try to ease my mind and distract it and just try to relax. But you can’t do anything, and I don’t have any energy to go to a cooling place like the news will tell you to do.”

— Diana Perez

“Every summer, I always stay at my work because the A/C is free.”

— Brenda Trujillo

VI. What Tenant Perspectives Reveal: Implications for L.A. County

The focus group responses make one thing overwhelmingly clear: renters want A/C in their homes. The vast majority of participants identified A/C as the only effective measure for maintaining good health and a decent quality of life during extreme-heat events.

Unfortunately, Los Angeles County's current policy proposal does not mandate landlords install A/C. Instead, it requires landlords to ensure habitable rooms remain below 82°F by whatever means they deem suitable. While this non-prescriptive approach may be flexible, it ultimately allows landlords to opt for cheaper, less effective solutions, such as ceiling fans, insulation, or shading—measures that may not protect tenants during high-heat conditions and may not prevent temperatures from rising above the 82°F threshold.

Many tenants live in homes that do not meet habitability standards, signaling landlords' resistance to compliance.

Focus group participants' responses revealed existing habitability issues, suggesting residential health and safety standards are already poorly enforced. One respondent, Ana Delgado, shared that her heater had not worked for years, and she was surprised to learn that functioning heating equipment is required by California law. This raises serious doubts about whether landlords—many of whom defer repairs in the interest of maximizing profit—will take appropriate steps to comply with a flexible cooling standard if it means they have to invest in their buildings.

Lack of equipment requirements creates unique enforcement challenges.

Because Los Angeles County's policy proposal does not mandate specific cooling equipment, compliance cannot be checked under the Rental Housing Habitability Program, which inspects rental units in unincorporated areas for code violations and habitability issues. That program focuses on visible, verifiable conditions such as functional heating systems, intact windows and doors, and proper weatherproofing.

Complaint-based enforcement may lead to no enforcement at all.

Enforcing an indoor maximum temperature presents unique challenges: heat is transient, and by the time an inspector arrives, temperatures may have dropped below the legal threshold, making violations difficult to substantiate. Consider one hypothetical scenario: a tenant reports an indoor temperature of 90°F during a heat wave, but by the time an inspector visits, the temperature has fallen to 81°F—technically compliant, despite the tenant's prior exposure to unsafe conditions.

Complaint-based systems also put the enforcement burden on renters to document unsafe temperatures and navigate agencies that often fail to protect them in real time. In addition, tenants who are low-income, undocumented, or fearful of landlord retaliation may be reluctant to report violations.

VII. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This report reveals that many tenants in Los Angeles are living through intolerable conditions during heat waves. The effects of extreme heat are not hypothetical—they can be measured in health emergencies, economic trade-offs, and the ongoing psychological and physical stress tenants endure. Los Angeles' aging building stock, rising utility costs, and hostile landlord-tenant dynamics often leave renters with few options to protect themselves from indoor heat. Meanwhile, tenants' DIY cooling strategies are insufficient, as are mandated indoor temperature thresholds, which are often passively enacted and poorly enforced.

As outlined in this report, A/C remains the most effective intervention for preventing heat-related illness and death. Yet Los Angeles County has stopped short of mandating it—and not without reason. Critics raise several concerns: Some point to the strain on the energy grid, arguing that a widespread increase in A/C use would require more electricity than current infrastructure can reliably supply, especially during peak summer demand, and that it could cause grid overload leading to power outages.[54] Others raise environmental objections, noting that many common refrigerants used in A/C units are potent greenhouse gases,[55] and that portable and window units expel hot air outside, potentially worsening ambient outdoor temperatures.[56] Then there's the economic argument: tenants may struggle to afford the upfront cost of a unit or the higher electricity bills it causes, making a mandate feel like an unfunded requirement with limited benefit.

The political resistance has also been significant. The landlord lobby, particularly groups like the Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles (AAGLA), strongly oppose A/C mandates. In a recent interview, Dan Yukelson, AAGLA executive director, was asked: "Are there other ways that you can imagine making life safer for tenants when it comes to extreme heat because we do know because of climate change the thermometer keeps rising?" He responded: "Ceiling fans could definitely be something that helps."[57] But, as the research makes clear, ceiling fans not only fail to cool people once indoor temperatures exceed 90°F, they can actually increase the risk of overheating by circulating hot air.

These concerns about A/C—its impact on the electric grid, the environment, and on housing affordability—are justified. They are problems we must solve, and many are working diligently to do so. But, in the meantime, we must prioritize the health and wellbeing of the renters grappling with extreme heat in their homes, and A/C is the best tool we have right now. If we permit indoor temperatures to climb above survivable thresholds, there will be more heat-related illnesses and deaths.

To meaningfully address extreme indoor heat and protect the health of tenants, Los Angeles City and County must mandate the installation of A/C in rental housing. If implemented with specificity and accountability, an A/C mandate could address many of the core challenges outlined in this report, including lessening reliance on complaint-based enforcement systems and curbing landlord retaliation.

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[54] Hye Min Park, Kelly Klima, Sophia Charan, and Javier Rojas Aguilera, "Identifying Resilient, Sustainable Cooling Strategies for Los Angeles," RAND Institute, March 2025, rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3563-1.html??cutoff=true&utm_source=AdaptiveMailer&utm_medium =email&utm_campaign=701QK00000OFji9YAD&utm_term=00vQK00000LymTyYAJ&org=1674&lvl=100&ite=295563&lea=4652631&ctr=0&par=1&trk=a0wQK00000BLQXRYA5.

[55] James M. Calm, "Emissions and Environmental Impacts from Air-Conditioning and Refrigeration Systems," *International Journal of Refrigeration*, 25, no. 3 (2002): 293305, doi.org/10.1016/S0140-7007(01)00067-6.

[56] F. Salamanca, M. Georgescu, A. Mahalov, M. Moustaoui, and M. Wang, "Anthropogenic Heating of the Urban Environment Due to Air Conditioning," *American Geophysical Union* (May 2014), doi.org/10.1002/2013JD021225.

[57] "Should LA Make AC Mandatory for All Rental Units?" KCRW, July 18, 2023, kcrw.com/news/shows/greater-la/immigration-heat/ac-mandate.

Grant Tenants an Affirmative Right to Cooling

Tenants should have a legally protected right to install and operate A/C in their homes. This would prevent landlords from prohibiting A/C. Establishing a right to cooling would also safeguard tenants from eviction or harassment stemming from requests to install A/C.

Mandate A/C as a Health and Safety Requirement

Mechanical cooling equipment should be required in all rental units, just as heating is currently required in rental housing under California law. An enforceable equipment requirement will ensure tenants are not vulnerable to rising indoor temperatures and that landlords are held to a clear, consistent standard.

Prohibit Passing Costs on to Tenants

To prevent economic hardship, policies mandating cooling equipment in rental housing must explicitly prohibit landlords from passing the capital investment costs of purchasing or installing that equipment on to tenants. If indoor cooling is designated as a habitability standard, then it is the legal responsibility of the property owner to ensure compliance—just as with plumbing, heating, or structural safety.

There should also be adequate protections in place so that tenants are not evicted under the guise of A/C installation. Under California's Tenant Protection Act (AB 1482), tenants can be evicted for "substantial remodel" work. Any cooling mandate should explicitly prohibit this type of eviction.

Provide Financial Assistance to Small Landlords with Demonstrated Hardship

Landlords—particularly those benefiting from decades of low property taxes under Proposition 13—can and should be able to absorb the cost of A/C installation through already allowable rent increases under the Los Angeles Rent Stabilization Ordinance (LARSO) and AB 1482. However, targeted financial assistance should be made available to small landlords who can demonstrate genuine economic hardship.

Require Energy-Efficient Equipment to Align with Climate Goals

Policy should mandate the installation of energy-efficient appliances that both cool and heat, such as electric heat pumps. These dual-function systems are critical to decarbonizing buildings and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Requiring heat pumps supports tenant health while advancing California's broader climate goals, positioning the cooling mandate as a model for climate-aligned housing policy and grid resilience.

Integrate Cooling Mandates with Decarbonization Funding

Policy should be designed to advance both climate resilience and emissions reductions by integrating a cooling policy with existing decarbonization initiatives. This includes creating a mechanism to connect landlords to local, state, and federal funding streams for decarbonization, such as the Equitable Building Decarbonization Program. Tenant cooling and building decarbonization should not be seen as separate objectives.

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