Harlem Heat

How hot is Harlem? Is it affecting our health? How does a community beat the heat?

ISeeChange partnered with the community of Harlem, WNYC, AdaptNY and WE ACT for Environmental Justice to explore how urban communities are adapting to increased risk of heat.

Heatwaves deaths > (Hurricanes+Earthquakes+Floods)

Warmer days can make for summer fun in the Northeast. But for many at-risk city residents, hot weather is a silent killer. "Urban heat islands" in cities like New York City trap heat in its concrete and asphalt infrastructure, and have relatively little vegetation to cool things off.

As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of summer heat waves, we will see more heat-related illnesses and premature deaths, especially among the elderly, young children, and those with chronic medical conditions. But most urban heat research is based on outdoor temperatures. Very little is known about how people experience and live with heat indoors.

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An estimated 140 New Yorkers die every year from extreme heat and its effects on chronic health conditions.

Heat On an Average Summer Day

Indoor temperatures remain high in all apartments, compared to ambient conditions.

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Treating Heatwaves as Natural Disasters

"Public agencies should not treat combating heat as just a long-term sustainability goal. This approach is dangerous. Intense heat episodes occur in pulses, like a hurricane or flash-floods. Heat in urban areas should be treated as a natural disaster that strikes pointedly and dangerous. Intense heat episodes occur in pulses, like a hurricane or flash-floods. Heat in urban areas should be treated as a natural disaster that strikes pointedly and dangerous. Intense heat episodes occur in pulses, like a hurricane or flash-floods. Heat in urban areas should be treated as a natural disaster that strikes pointedly and dangerous. Intense heat episodes occur in pulses, like a hurricane or flash-floods. Heat in urban areas should be treated as a natural disaster that strikes pointedly and...

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How do people beat the heat?

Less than half of the residents in public housing have air conditioning in New York. Harlem Heat participants say housing authority fees for AC installation and electricity use are prohibitively expensive. The city opens up air conditioned rooms for the public during extreme heat events for people to cool off, but residents find them difficult to access, hard to find, and awkward to use especially since the greatest heat impacts are felt at night.

Residents without AC cite closer to home ways to cope with the heat - frequent showers, freezing their clothes, community pools, opening windows, spraying water on fans.

"The heat has been exhausting. It's hard to get dressed in the morning... It feels like Atlanta..."

Anthony Carrion

"I get dizzy, it's hard to focus and think... if I'm still inside after 1:30 it's a risk to my own health."

Victor Sanchez

Indoor air temperatures in apartments in Harlem were up to 7 degrees hotter this summer than outdoor temperatures. South facing apartments on the fifth floor or higher are most at risk.

"I open my door and it's like a wall. I wake up gasping. We don't have air conditioning and fans are not enough."

Diane Lannert-Hymans

"The heat has been exhausting. It's hard to get dressed in the morning... It feels like Atlanta..."

Anthony Carrion

"There is an air conditioned tenant room, but those folding chairs are not designed to sit in for a length of time."

Euline Williams

Harlem Heat culminated in a collaborative community workshop to collectively brainstorm possible solutions to urban heat risks such as a sensor early warning system and community green roofs. Developing the community solutions are what we hope a second season of Harlem Heat could investigate.

"It's very hot in [my kids'] room... The kids are five and seven years old, in bunk beds, but my daughter avoids the top bunk because of heat. Instead, she sleeps on an air mattress on the floor."

Gabriel Bencomo

"We have air conditioners in the kitchen and bedroom, but ConEd has limited how high it goes, to conserve energy. Fans help, but heat rises and we barely feel the air conditioning... Every year gets worse."

Shirley Reed