**Trends and disparities of dangerous humid heat exposure among incarcerated people in the United States**

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**Incarcerated people in the US are at high risk for heat-related illness and death. However, a comprehensive assessment of dangerous heat conditions at US carceral facilities is lacking. Here, we evaluated recent exposure trends of dangerous humid heat – defined as number of days annually the maximum wet bulb globe temperature exceeded 28°C – during 1982-2020 at 4,078 continental US carceral facilities holding ~2 million incarcerated people. On average, carceral facilities experienced 41.25 million person-days of exposure annually, with state prisons contributing 61%, and encountered 5.5 more dangerous humid heat days annually compared to other US locations. An estimated 915,627 people (45% of total) were incarcerated in 1,739 facilities with increasing numbers of dangerous humid heat days; southern facilities experienced the most rapid warming. Our findings highlight the urgent need for enhanced infrastructure, health system interventions, and reform in the treatment of incarcerated people, especially as climate change intensifies dangerous heat exposure.**

Incarcerated people in the United States are at high risk for heat-related morbidity and mortality1–3 due to their physical confinement, social isolation, and high rates of chronic mental and physical illnesses.4 Unlike the vast majority of the United States population, who have access to air conditioning5 – the most effective individual-level intervention to mitigate extreme heat exposure1 – many of the 2 million incarcerated people6 are in the 44 states that do not provide universal air conditioning in carceral facilities.7, 8

Identifying where incarcerated people are exposed to dangerous heat conditions is fundamental to advancing environmental justice for one of the most marginalized and disempowered communities in the United States.3 Yet researchers and policymakers have largely ignored how dangerous heat impacts incarcerated people,3, 9, 10 in part due to perceptions that their physical suffering is justified.3 Concerningly, as climate change accelerates, the United States will experience more frequent, intense, and longer heat waves11 that may disproportionately affect incarcerated people.

While previous work has assessed how heat impacts incarcerated people in the United States,2 there is a critical need to quantify dangerous heat conditions at carceral facilities.9, 10 Without this knowledge, the effect of more frequent heat waves11 on incarcerated people cannot be contextualized nor framed against future climate projections. Identifying where incarcerated people may face disproportionately high exposure is essential to guide targeted interventions to reduce harm to incinerated peoples’ health.5 Furthermore, mapping the spatial and temporal pattern of extreme heat trajectories among incarcerated communities – as well as disparities in exposure – can inform policy discussions to reduce harm at the local, state, and federal levels.3, 9, 10

Here, we evaluate recent exposure to and the trends of dangerous humid heat conditions during 1982 - 2020 for all 4,078 operational and populated carceral facilities (referring to prisons, jails, and other carceral facilities) in the continental United States (Materials and Methods, Supporting Information). We define dangerous humid heat as the number of days per year where the maximum wet bulb globe temperature (WBGTmax) exceeded 28°C, the threshold defined by the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for acclimated populations to limit humid heat exposure under moderate workloads (234–349 W).12 Exposure is defined as the number of days per year that WBGTmax exceeded 28°C multiplied by the total estimated incarcerated population exposed (person-days per year).

Our objectives are to (1) characterize dangerous humid heat at each carceral facility location and by facility type and state; (2) measure how exposure to dangerous humid heat at carceral facility locations compares with the rest of the population nationally and by state; and (3) calculate how the trends over of dangerous humid heat at carceral facilities has changed over time. For objectives (1) and (2), we focus on recent years (2016 – 2020) because we are interested in the current dangerous humid heat exposures. For objective (3), we focus on the entire 1982 -2020 period because we are interested in long term trends. The underlying, carceral facility-level daily WBGTmax records during 1982 - 2020 and the derived data used in our analysis are publicly available (Data and Code Availability).

During 2016 - 2020 there were, on average, an estimated 41.25 million person-days of dangerous humid heat annually at carceral facility in the United States. State prisons accounted for 61% (24.48 million person-days) of total exposure (Figure 1a), followed by county prisons (11.09 million person-days; 27%). The estimated 145,240 people in Texas and 98,941 in Florida housed in state-run carceral facilities in 2018, 12% of all incarcerated people in the United States, accounted for 52% of total exposure (28% in Texas, 24% in Florida) (Figure 1a). An estimated 118 carceral facilities, largely in southern California, Arizona, Texas, and inland Florida, experienced on average 75 days or more per year of dangerous humid heat (Figure 1b). Across all carceral facilities in the US, the Starr County Jail, a county facility in Rio Grande, TX that incarcerated an estimated 249 people in 2018, experienced the largest number of dangerous humid heat days on average during 2016 – 2020 (126.2 days per year).

During 1982 - 2020, carceral facility locations were, on average, exposed to 5.5 more dangerous humid heat days annually compared to locations without carceral facilities (Figure 2a). However, there was a considerable amount of variance from year to year, with a maximal disparity of 9.8 more days at carceral facilities than locations without carceral facilities in 1998 and a minimal disparity of 3.5 days in 1994. Arizona, California, and Nevada ranked as the top three states with the greatest exposure disparities (Figure 2a). Carceral facilities in Arizona experienced 13.1 more days per year than the rest of the state and 40.9 more days compared to the entire continental United States during 1982 - 2020 on average.

An estimated 915,627 people in the United States, 45% of the estimated total incarcerated population, were housed in 1,739 carceral facilities with an annual increase in the number of days per year WBGTmax exceeded 28°C during 1982 – 2020 (Figure 2b). These facilities are primarily located in the Southern United States, which faced the greatest the number of dangerous humid heat days per year since 1982 (Figure 2b). At the state level, carceral facilities in Florida experienced on-average 22.1 more days in 2020 compared to 1982, the greatest increase in dangerous humid heat days for all continental states.

The majority of carceral facilities in the Southern United States have experienced an increase in dangerous hot humid days and are located in states that do not have mandatory indoor temperature requirements for state-run institutions.7, 8 This geographic disparity reflects state-level criminal justice policies, as Southern states have the highest incarceration rates in the United States,17 and the inherent differential effects of climate change. Throughout the country, including in the Northeast and Midwest, many locations with carceral facilities also experienced an increasing number of dangerous humid heat days compared to locations without them.

Incarcerated people have few options to reduce the impact of heat waves3, 9, 10 and these marginalized communities are often disproportionately susceptible to the effect of dangerous humid heat given preexisting health conditions. In fact, 43% of the state prison population has a previous mental health diagnosis18 and people on psychotropic medications are at increased risk for heat illness.10 Exposure to dangerous humid heat can also cause both acute health effects, such as heat stroke or mortality, and long-term damage. For example, chronic dehydration strains kidney function and those with chronic heat exposure have been shown to have higher rates of kidney disease.13

From a climatic perspective, we find that 1998 and 2010 were the worst two years, respectively, for heat disparities between incarcerated and non-incarcerated populations in the United States. These two years were also strong El Niño events.14 While El Niño affected other years during 1982 - 2020, our findings suggest that El Niño may be an important precursor to elevated exposure disparities and seasonal forecasts could help facilities prepare for summer humid heat waves to reduce the impacts of dangerous conditions for incarcerated communities.

Our work highlights how incarcerated populations in the United States are systematically exposed to dangerous humid heat with the greatest exposure and rates of increase concentrated in state-run institutions. Federal, state, and local laws mandating safe temperature ranges, enhanced social and physical infrastructure, and health system interventions could mitigate the effect of dangerous heat on this underserved and overburdened group. Underlying this is the need for a fundamental overhaul to the perception and treatment of incarcerated people in environmental public health policy and regulatory action. Doing so is critical to environmental justice, particularly for incarcerated people with limited social and political agency.

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**Methods**

We assigned daily WBGTmax estimates to 4,078 carceral facility locations for the United States during 1982 - 2020. WBGTmax is constructed from high-resolution (4 km) daily maximum 2m air temperatures (Tmax)and maximum vapor pressure deficit (VPDmax) from the PRISM dataset.1 Tmax and VPDmax are used to construct daily maximum heat index (HImax) following the US National Weather Service’s procedure,2 which is converted to shaded or indoor WBGTmax using a quadratic transform that assumes fixed wind speeds and no radiated heat (Supporting Information). Facility location and population data is from Homeland Infrastructure Foundation-Level Data (HIFLD), produced by the Department of Homeland Security.3

We then define dangerous humid heat frequency as the number of days per year where the maximum wet bulb globe temperature (WBGTmax) exceeded 28°C, the threshold used by the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) for acclimated populations to limit humid heat exposure under moderate workloads (234–349 W).4 Exposure during 2016 - 2020 is measured by multiplying the number of incarcerated people housed at each carceral facility in 2018 by the average number of days WBGTmax exceeded 28°C during 2016 - 2020. Annual disparity between incarcerated and locations without carceral facilities is measured by taking the population-weighted difference between the number of days WBGTmax exceeded 28°C at the location of a facility and the rest of the state. To measure the annual rate of change in dangerous humid heat days per year, we fit linear regressions to the count of days WBGTmax exceeded 28°C per year for each facility. For a more detailed explanation of methods, see the online Supplementary Information.

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**Data availability**

Daily 4-km PRISM data from 1982 to 2020 and HIFLD data are freely available at https://prism.oregonstate.edu/recent/ and https://hifld-geoplatform.opendata.arcgis.com, respectively. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) bridged-race dataset (Vintage 2020) is available from during 1990 to 2020 https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/bridged\_race.htm and from the US Census Bureau before 1990 https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/1980s-county.html.

**Code availability**

All code to reproduce this work, as well as underlying daily WBGTmax for each carceral facility during 1982 - 2020 and analytical products used here, are freely available at [Github link provided upon publication].

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**Author contributions**

C.T. and R.M.P. designed research; C.T., V.D.L., and R.M.P. performed research; C.T. and R.M.P. contributed analytic tools; C.T., V.D.L, and R.M.P analyzed data; and C.T., V.D.L., R.S., A.E.N. and R.M.P wrote the paper.

**Competing interests statement**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

**Figure 1.** Mean annual exposure during 2016 - 2020 to dangerous humid heat in carceral facilities within the continental United States (N=4,078), measured by: (a) the number of person-days WBGTmax exceeded 28°C for incarcerated people by state and carceral facility type; and (b) the number of days WBGTmax exceeded 28°C for each carceral facility.

**Figure 2.** (a)Population-weighted difference between the annual number of dangerous hot-humid days (defined as WBGTmax exceeding 28°C) at the location of carceral facilities versus all other locations in the continental US from 1982 – 2020, overall and stratified by state, and (b) the total change in the number of dangerous hot-humid days per year WBGTmax exceeded 28°C for each carceral facility in the continental United States from 1982 - 2020.