

# Rising Temperatures, Rising Risks: A Three-Decade Analysis of Children's Heat Exposure in China (1990-2020)

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February 1, 2024

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## Abstract

Children are more physically and physiologically vulnerable than adults to the ill effects of climatic and environmental shocks such as heat waves. There is a growing evidence linking extreme heat exposure to poorer developmental outcomes for children in domains ranging from education to health to long-term productivity. The frequency and intensity of heat waves are increasing as the earth's climate warms, but how these trends translate to changes in children's heat exposure is not well established. Changes in children's heat exposure are a joint function of changes in temperature and its geographic distribution and changes in the geographic distribution of the child population. Most studies that estimate the population burden of extreme heat 1) have focused on the total burden measured as person-time while overlooking within-population heterogeneities; 2) have not specifically focused on child populations; 3) have not explicitly attended to changing population distributions over time; 4) have relied on average temperature approaches without considering large hourly, daily and monthly temperature variations; and 5) have not estimated exposures at different, health-relevant temperature thresholds.

Using the case of China, the world's most populous country over the three recent decades studied, this paper estimates children's changing exposure to extreme high temperatures by linking county-level child population data to hourly Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI) data across two censuses spanning 30 years (1990-2020). We propose a convenient, low-data-demand framework for estimating the share of children at risk of extreme temperature exposures that 1) jointly considers temperature thresholds and the share of time exposed to such temperature thresholds, 2) jointly considers the geographical and temporal distributions of temperature and of children, and 3) allows for estimates for more and less extreme thresholds. Applying this framework to China, we find substantial increases in the average high-heat exposure for children and the share of children at risk and substantial regional heterogeneities. We also find that approximately half of the overall change in child high-heat exposure between 1990 and 2020 is driven by heat increases and the rest is driven by shifts in child population towards locations that have higher temperatures, illustrating the importance of paying attention to population distribution in addition to temperature patterns.

**Keywords:** Extreme temperature, children

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# 1 Introduction

Nearly half of the world's children live in countries identified by UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index as high-risk (UNICEF 2021), and children are highly physically and physiologically susceptible to climate-related disasters, hazards,<sup>1</sup> and diseases. For example, children are highly vulnerable to daily thermo-regulatory stress and other health problems when exposed to extreme temperatures (Smith 2019; UNICEF 2021; Xu et al. 2012), and their education can also be affected (Park, Behrer, and Goodman 2020). Growing evidence suggests that heat exposure affects children's short- and long-term development and welfare outcomes, from education to health to long-term productivity. This body of work includes emerging literature in China, which is home to more than 253.38 million children ages 0-14 in the year 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2021). In China, extreme-heat exposure has been linked to health outcomes including lower birthweights, more preterm birth, the common cold, hand, foot, and mouth diseases, and asthma (Guo et al. 2012; Liu et al. 2022; Lu et al. 2022; Lu et al. 2018; Ren et al. 2023; Xu et al. 2015), and extreme temperatures have also been linked to poorer academic performance (Jiang et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2018). And while the intersection of temperature and bodily development is less studied, Lai et al. (2023) and Zivin and Shrader (2016) review cross-country evidence suggesting that extreme temperatures experienced at an early age can limit body development and thus work productivity as an adult.

In short, research from China and elsewhere suggests that rising temperatures and associated increases in heat spells could have negative implications for children across a range of important life domains. However, studies have not yet rigorously established the extent to which heat exposure among children has been changing. To do so requires attention not only to identifying where and how much temperatures have changed, but also to where children live and, importantly, to the possibility of changes over time in the geographical distribution of the child population. A line of research on China, unlinked to population data, has shown an increase in the frequency of yearly high heat exposure days, with the highest intensities occurring outside of the North (Li and Zha 2020). A separate body of work has considered the average population burden of heat exposure (Chen, He, and Zhang 2023; Zhan et al. 2018; Zhang et al. 2020), with some studies decomposing sources of increased heat exposure (Jones et al. 2018), and some considering region-specific patterns and trends (Li and Zha 2020; Shi et

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1. For reviews of heat exposure effects and effects of other climatic hazards on children, see Connon and Dominelli (2022a, 2022b)

al. 2021; Sun et al. 2020). However, little work has focused specifically on estimating exposure levels and changes in the child population and none has considered the potential interactions between shifts in the distribution of child population and distributions of heat exposure across locations over time. With unprecedented internal migration in China in recent decades, the contributions of shifting geographical distribution of children to their heat exposure could be substantial.

This paper links county-specific child population counts from Chinese censuses to hourly temperature data to estimate ambient heat-exposure risk for children between 1990 and 2020, incorporating geographic and temporal distributions of heat and the population of children. We propose a framework for measuring the share of children at risk of extreme temperature exposures that jointly considers 1) various temperature thresholds and 2) the share of time exposed to extreme heat using those temperature thresholds. In addition to attending to changes in the geographic distribution of the child population over time, this framework improves on many prior estimates of population burdens of heat exposure by 1) capitalizing on temporally dis-aggregated data that allows consideration of significant heterogeneities in hourly variations in temperatures across space and 2) allowing for estimation of exposure burdens at different temperature thresholds thought to be relevant to human health and functioning.<sup>2</sup>

Results from this exercise show substantial increases in average heat exposure for children and the share of children at risk. Half of the overall change in child heat exposure between 1990 and 2020 is attributable to heat increases. There is substantial regional heterogeneity, with much of the national increase in child exposure to extreme heat attributable to changes in the Eastern region. Most importantly, this analysis reveals that about half of the rising exposure to heat among children is driven by shifts in the child population toward locations that have higher temperatures.

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2. A number of mortality studies in China have used temperature data. Zeng et al. (2022) considers age-specific disparities in temperature-driven mortality, using the 2000 and 2010 censuses. Zeng et al. finds youth to lose more years of life from increased heat compared to elders, although they do acknowledge a lack of analysis of child ages specifically in their study. Liao et al. (2023) goes further in observing mortality, utilizing census data from 2000-2010, and breaking up the analysis into China's counties. They find that increased daily maximum temperature increases monthly mortality rate across counties by about 1.7%. However, Liao et al. (2023) does not focus on children as uniquely vulnerable population.

## 2 Background

In studies that consider population heat exposures, a prevalent metric for assessing heat exposure is the change in exposure in total person-time. Person-time exposure statistics are determined by both the population count and the duration of exposure to a specific risk factor over a given period in a particular location.<sup>3</sup> An aggregate statistic for a region or country is computed by summing person-time across locations within the region or country. While aggregate person-time serves as a valuable estimate for measuring the overall burden on a population, it has two limitations. First, when comparing exposures over time, aggregate person-time statistics will capture changes in aggregate population size over time in addition to changes in average heat exposure burdens. This makes the results harder to interpret. For example, if the rate of population decline surpasses the rate of temperature increase, the resultant person-time estimates may diminish over time. Second, the person-time aggregate provides a single statistic of exposure for a region or country, overlooking the heterogeneities in ambient exposure changes across populations residing in locations with differing climatic change experiences. We propose a distributional approach to estimate the heterogeneities in changes of the percentages of children's time under heat stress.

Zhang et al. (2020) runs multiple projections to examine long-term extreme-heat temperature exposure during China's warm season weighed by population growth, using fine-resolution data and finding a projected increase in heat exposure in comparison to projected spatially-weighted temperature data. Spangler, Liang, and Wellenius (2022) presents a relevant meteorological data set in the United States context using hourly temperature extremes and the Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI) calculated and weighed at the county-population level for the 21st century. However, many studies suffer from a high level of geographic or temporal aggregation of their data. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (2022) focuses on increasing durations of global heatwaves and projections for the future, using daily maximum temperatures to visualize global exposures for children using admittedly low-resolution data. And globally, Kjellstrom et al. (2018) observe heat exposures on working populations using UTCI to find projected falling working capacity, also not further disaggregating the population data. These studies demonstrate the underutilized potential of current climate data analysis that our framework seeks to rectify by digging deeper into population-specific and

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3. The person-days of heat exposure in a place at time  $t$  can be computed, for example, by multiplying the days where the maximum temperature exceeds a threshold level with the total population residing in a place at time  $t$ .

person-time statistics.

### 3 Methods and Data

**Methods** In this section, we summarize our framework and method for measuring child population at risk of heat exposures. Our results

**Data** In terms of climate data, we utilize the fifth generation of the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF) atmospheric reanalyses of the global climate: the ERA5-HEAT dataset ([napoli\\_thermal\\_2020](#)). ERA5-HEAT, a distinct advancement from its predecessors, offers hourly data on numerous climate variables with a spatial resolution of 0.25 degrees one of which we utilize is Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI). UTCI provides an integrative measure of the human-perceived equivalent temperature, taking into account factors like air temperature, humidity, wind speed, and radiant heat ([Bröde et al. 2012](#); [Jendritzky, Dear, and Havenith 2012](#); [Jendritzky and Höppe 2017](#)).

For population data, we utilize Chinese census data for the years 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2020 ([beijing\\_hua\\_tong\\_ren\\_shi\\_chang\\_xin\\_xi\\_you\\_xian\\_ze\\_ren\\_gong\\_si\\_1990\\_2005](#); [beijing\\_hua\\_tong\\_ren\\_shi\\_china\\_data\\_lab\\_china\\_2020](#); [all\\_china\\_market\\_research\\_ltd\\_2020\\_2022](#)). County-level population data, shapefiles, and microdata on demographic characteristics of age and gender were extracted and used to construct the population exposures by county.

For regional analysis, temperature and population data were sorted by province and assigned a region according to the four recognized economic regions of China (National Bureau of Statistics of China [2011](#)).

### 4 Results

**Aggregate average changes in extreme temperature burdens over time for cohorts of children.** The complexities of living under a dynamic anthropocentric context have necessitated expanding and reconsidering how people experience extreme heat. [Arbuthnott et al. \(2016\)](#) systematically reviews the literature and finds evidence to believe that exposure susceptibility to high temperatures, in relation to mortality, has lowered for persons depending on location, pointing to an element of dynamic climate adaptation. The Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI) is another example of consideration of human-experienced climate change. Developed

at the beginning of the 21st century by the International Society of Biometeorology, the UTCI is an index used for comprehensively measuring the interaction of the thermal environment upon the human body (Bröde et al. 2012; Jendritzky, Dear, and Havenith 2012; Jendritzky and Höppe 2017). The benefit of UTCI over other measures is UTCI's sensitivity to fluctuations while still maintaining high correlations to some, but not all other types of temperature indexes (Blazejczyk et al. 2012; Bröde et al. 2018; Spangler et al. 2023). UTCI lends towards a consideration of ambient temperature as it is actually humanly experienced, supporting a greater development in the literature towards recognizing population-weighted exposures rather than defaulting to spatially-based measurements (GAO et al. 2018; Kyaw et al. 2023; Spangler, Liang, and Wellenius 2022).

When the UTCI is above 26°C, it indicates a moderate or higher level of thermal stress on the human body. As the UTCI value increases, the level of thermal stress on the human body intensifies. Figure 1 depicts an increase in temperature exposure for children ages 0 to 14 across mainland China from 1990 to 2020. Focusing on 26°C, a temperature level that is considered to be associated with moderate or stronger heat stress, an average child in China experienced 20.09% of her total ambient hours in 1990 at equal to or above this threshold. By 2020, this percentage increased to 22.81% (Figure 1), representing a 2.72 percentage points and 13.54 % increase in annual average exposure duration, which corresponds to an annual average increase of 238 hours of additional ambient moderate or stronger heat stress exposure over 30 years.

Additionally, on average in 2020, children experience 8.26% and 1.16% of their annual ambient hours—marking 14.70% and 10.64% increases compared to 1990—at over 32°C and 38°C, which are temperature levels marking thresholds for strong and very strong heat stress. This nationwide increase will be further inspected in the following sections to understand more local implications of UTCI change.

To situate the contribution of our framework and results utilizing exposure of child populations across China to distributions of temperature over time, we first outline other temperature exposure literature. Literature focusing on temperature exposure can be grouped into one of three categories. The first is literature that observes high-temperature trends in a location across time, such as in China, without a specific focus on its population. Luo and Lau (2019) computes temperature readings from weather stations to depict long-term trends of increasing summer heat stress across China's geography without directly taking into consideration

administrative boundaries or the populations within them. Luo and Lau (2018) similarly uses station data and zooms in to find increased heat stress spatially concentrated around urban centers. These works are limited to only considering space and not population. At most, this literature mentions that certain areas of a nation are more densely populated than others without actually including population counts in their exposure calculation.

The second literature on heat exposure over time roughly approximates location-based populations using Chinese national and grouped provincial borders to estimate broad population exposure. The limitations of United Nations Children’s Fund (2022) have already been noted, namely that while it uniquely focuses on children its usage of national aggregate data prevents further utility. Freychet et al. (2022) uses country-level population and national growth in projecting future heat risk, finding increasingly high experienced risk as temperatures increase but only calculating this risk based on nation-level population. Zhan et al. (2018) is slightly more detailed, finding differing levels of increased population heat exposure projected overtime on the regional level. While this literature provides some empirical context for heat exposure for a population over time compared to the first set of literature, population variation is liable to differ across even a single province let alone the regions and China as a whole.

A third literature is more exact in attributing heat exposure to localized counts of populations over time. This third category has been the most advanced iteration thus far in the literature. Li and Zha (2020) for example uses county-level population data to find exposure over time to extreme heat days in the summer, finding broad increases in risk with particular hot spots in counties in East, South, and Central China. Chen, He, and Zhang (2023), Kennard et al. (2022), and Ning et al. (2023) all use gridded temperature and population data to find increased experienced days of heat risk driven in part by population distribution over time. However, even in this more advanced literature, a true distribution of time during which extreme heat is experienced is eschewed for daily summary measures.

Literature on heat exposure has gotten more nuanced in its consideration of population except in consideration of special populations, like children. Further, temperature distribution over time has been under-considered until now. All three types of literature suffer from their utilization of summary statistic measures of temperature: mean and maximum temperatures. These measures are naive to how human beings experience temperature throughout time. By utilizing population distribution and temperature distribution over time, we see for the first time with great detail who is actually at risk as a result of increased temperature trends. Next,



we will show that our contribution offers a critical foundation for outcome-focused literature as well. Building upon the exposure literature, our research is the first to show in detail an increasing share of time that child populations across China face extreme heat in their immediate surroundings.

**Increases in Share of Children at Risk of Heat Exposure.** While the previous results focus on heat exposure for the average child in China, it does not provide information on how many children are increasingly at risk of heat exposure. In this section, given the distribution of heat and children across counties in China, we examine whether the *percentage* of children most affected by heat stress has also changed over time.

As discussed in the methods section, we compute the share of children at risk by considering jointly two thresholds of risks: a threshold for temperature and also a threshold for the share of time (hours) exposed to temperature above a particular threshold. In Figure 2, we consider different levels of temperature as well as shares of time thresholds, providing different measures of changes in the share of children at risk depending on plausible considerations of thresholds for risks.

Here we consider two ends of the risk spectrum. First, we consider a lower temperature threshold combined with a higher share of hours, then a higher temperature threshold combined with a lower share of hours. Then, at the bottom left direction of each sub-figure in Figure 2, in 1990, 9.49% of children experienced moderate or stronger heat stress (i.e. UTCI above 26°C) for over 30% of their hours. By 2020, this number had risen to 19.51%, marking an increase of 10.02 percentage points. In other words, the share of children experiencing heat stress for at least 30% of their total hours in 2020 almost doubled compared to 1990. Second, at the top right direction of each sub-figure in Figure 2, in 1990, 17.45% of children have at least 10% of their total hours that are above 32°C. This number rose to 23.55% in 2020, representing a 6.10 percentage point or 34.96% increase. Overall, by both at-risk standards, approximately one-quarter of children in China are at-risk of extreme heat exposure in 2020, increasing from about only one-sixth of children in 1990.

Additionally, Figure 2 also shows alarmingly fast increases in the share of children at risk toward the direction (lower right of Figure 2) of increasing risk. In particular, the share of children experiencing at least 30 percent of annual ambient time at over 29°C and 20 percent of time at over 31°C increased from 0.02% and 0.25% in 1990 to 1.37% and 1.39% in 2020,



respectively. While the share of children exposed at these extreme risk levels remain small, these increases represent approximately 60-fold and 5-fold jumps in the share of children at these high exposure risk levels, respectively.

In observing thresholds of risk being surpassed over time we provide important context on the increasing risk being faced by China’s children. Much literature has focused on child health and development outcomes being negatively affected by increases in temperature over time, including: preterm birth (Ren et al. 2023), low birth weight (Liu et al. 2022), and a growing list of other negative health outcomes mentioned throughout this paper’s introduction. This growing outcome literature is important but has lacked until now a foundational basis to observe which children are actually at risk of the outcomes being researched. This research gap is especially problematic due to a lack of exposure-over-time literature focusing on child populations. Here we create the opportunity to ground the child outcome-focused literature and observe the development of experienced risk over time. Our contribution is especially powerful as we provide multiple thresholds of temperature and time to depict levels of risk severity. Our novel framework can easily be adapted to other research contexts and can be extended to other national settings or populations of interest.

**Decomposing the Contributions of Changes in Temperature and Population.** Figure 3 depicts a counterfactual decomposition analysis against the UTCI experienced by populations in 1990 and 2020. This counterfactual decomposition shows the extent to which change in exposure is due to population change, or due to change in UTCI as a result of meteorological change.

We first present the percentage gap between year 2020 and 1990 (as indicated by the red line). As mentioned above, we observed a 2.7% increase in children’s exposure to moderate or stronger heat stress (the vertical line indicates the critical UTCI threshold of 26°C). We then conduct the first counterfactual analysis (green line: climate effect), which combines the children population distribution in 2020 with the observed temperature in 1990. We take the percentage deviation of the counterfactual results from the original results in 1990. In the second counterfactual analysis (blue line: population effect), we use children population distribution in 1990 with the observed temperature in 2020, and again we take the percentage deviation of the results from the original results in 1990. We find that the population effect and climate effect are almost identical after the 26°C UTCI threshold. It implies that the change in

child population distribution and temperature equally contribute to an increase in children's exposure to heat stress at this level.

We note a unique contribution we provide via our decomposition in focusing on the historic attribution of temperature exposure and its change in China from 1990 to 2020. Sparse literature exists that performs decomposition analysis in China's past data context. Sun et al. (2008) performs a historic decomposition of weather station temperature data into regions, finding Northern China to be most significantly contributing to overall temperature increases in the country over time. However, this study again only considers space and not population. Dong, Tao, and Zhang (2023) provides a rich but geographically limited historical case study of heat-waves in the Xinjiang Province from 1961 to 2020. Dong, Tao, and Zhang (2023) decomposes temperature exposure into population effect, climate effect, and the interaction of the two, finding that since 1961 population effects have become increasingly important and climate less so. Emphasizing the flexibility of data utilization in our analyses, including counterfactual and decomposition analyses, we find comparable regional historical results. We also showcase, likely for the first time, China's overall historical climate and child population-decomposed temperature exposure trends from 1990 to 2020.

**Changes in Children's Heat Exposure Across Regions.** Results pictured in Figure 4 depict the difference in regionally experienced UTCI for children ages 0 to 14 across China in the years 1990 and 2020, using hourly temperature data.

Panel A in Figure 4 displays the cumulative density curve of hourly exposure to a specified UTCI (Universal Thermal Climate Index) threshold, ranging from  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $40^{\circ}\text{C}$ , across the years 1990 to 2020. This curve represents data for four distinct economic regions. A vertical line is drawn at  $26^{\circ}\text{C}$ , marking the threshold above which conditions are considered to represent moderate or higher levels of heat stress.

Panel B in Figure 4 presents the percentage point deviation between the cumulative density curve in 1990 and 2020 after  $26^{\circ}\text{C}$  by region. It highlights that the national increase in child exposure to extreme heat from 1990 to 2020 shown in Figure 1 is primarily attributed to changes in the Eastern region, with notable but smaller contributions from the Northeastern and Central regions.

For example, an average child in Eastern China was exposed to moderate or more severe heat stress for 23.65% of their total hour in 1990. By 2020, this percentage increased to 28.09%,

representing 18.77% increase in annual average exposure or 389 hours of additional heat stress exposure.

We showcase for the first time regional variation for temperature exposure on child populations over time. We provide an extra layer of nuance to other literature that emphasizes regional differences in temperature exposure over time. For example, Ning et al. (2023) and Sun et al. (2020) both find regional nuance in heatwaves, with Southeast China experiencing hotter heatwaves but Northeast China experiencing more frequent incidences of heatwaves. Shi et al. (2021) observes regional changes in heating and cooling, making their case for degree-hours as a measure by showing temperature progression across years at different times of day. Li and Zha (2020) is especially effective in finding Northern China experiencing the least increase in heat risk days compared to other regions. These and other examples of existing literature (Dong, Tao, and Zhang 2023; Xiao et al. 2017; Yang et al. 2021; Zhao et al. 2018), leave gaps in the form of long-term observation of temperature exposure on populations across individual provinces of China. Our research framework fills in these gaps, offering a more holistic view of temperature distribution and allowing for zooming into national and regional child population contexts, to understand for the first time the regional heat risk children have been facing over time in China.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we combined county-level census population data on child distribution from 1990 and 2020 with temperature data to study changes in ambient heat exposure facing children over three decades. We find substantial increases in the average heat exposure for children and the share of children at risk and substantial regional heterogeneity. Interestingly, we find that half of the overall changes in high child heat exposure are driven by heat increases and the rest is driven by shifts in child population towards locations that have higher temperatures.

In our first result, we found that in 1990, an *average* child in China experienced moderate or stronger heat stress (UTCI 26°C and above) for 20.09 % of their hours. By 2020, this percentage had increased by 2.7 percentage points (pp) (Figure 1). In our second result, we found that in 1990, 9.49 % of children experienced moderate or stronger heat stress for over 30 % of their hours. By 2020, this figure had risen to 19.51 %, marking an increase of 10.02 pp (Figure 2).

For our third result, counterfactual decomposition analyses reveal that the effects of escalating temperatures and a growing child population in the heat-affected regions contribute equally to the overall increase in heat exposure among children (Figure 3). For the fourth result, the substantial increase in children's exposure to heat stress in Eastern China, the nation's most economically developed and densely populated region, is a primary driver behind the overall surge observed at the national level (Figure 4).

We implicitly assume uniform sensitivity and adaptability to heat stress among all individuals, overlooking the potential adaptability of those residing in warmer regions. Our definition of heat exposure is simplified, and future research could adopt the same methodology with different definitions of heat stress. For instance, exploring heat wave episodes rather than focusing solely on single hours above the heat stress threshold could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, while our focus is on total hours, it's important to acknowledge that children may tend to stay indoors with air conditioners during heat waves, and the ability to withstand heat stress may vary by socioeconomic status. Lastly, despite utilizing county-level data, a more granular measure may better capture heat stress even with our same framework, particularly in urban areas where factors like the heat island effect come into play.

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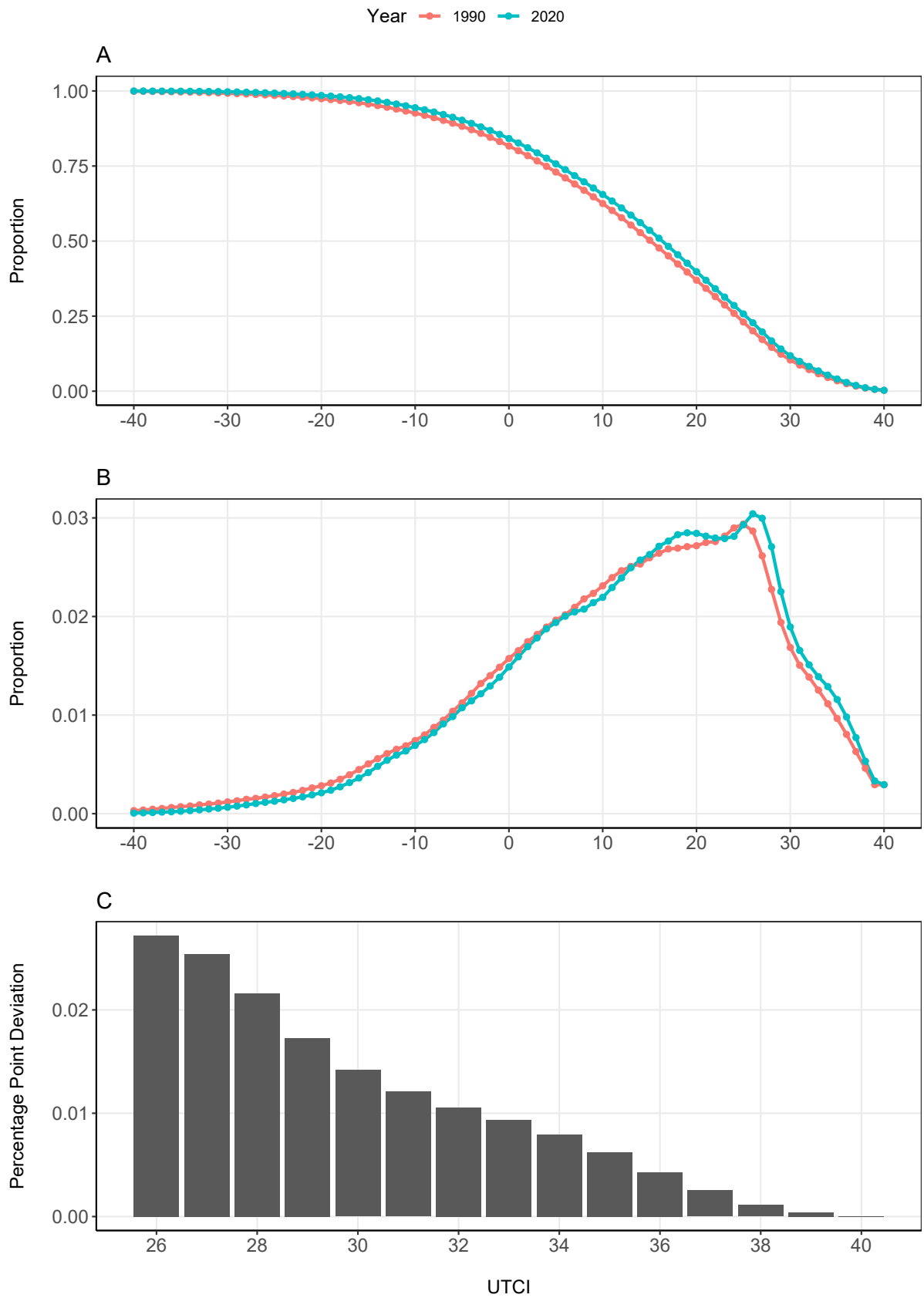
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Figure 1: Change in Hourly Temperature Exposure for Children (0-14)



Notes: A. Cumulative Density Curve. B. Probability Density Curve. C. Percentage Point Deviation from 2020 to 1990.

Figure 2: Proportion of Children Experiencing Heat Stress by Proportion of Hours Across Different UTCI Thresholds

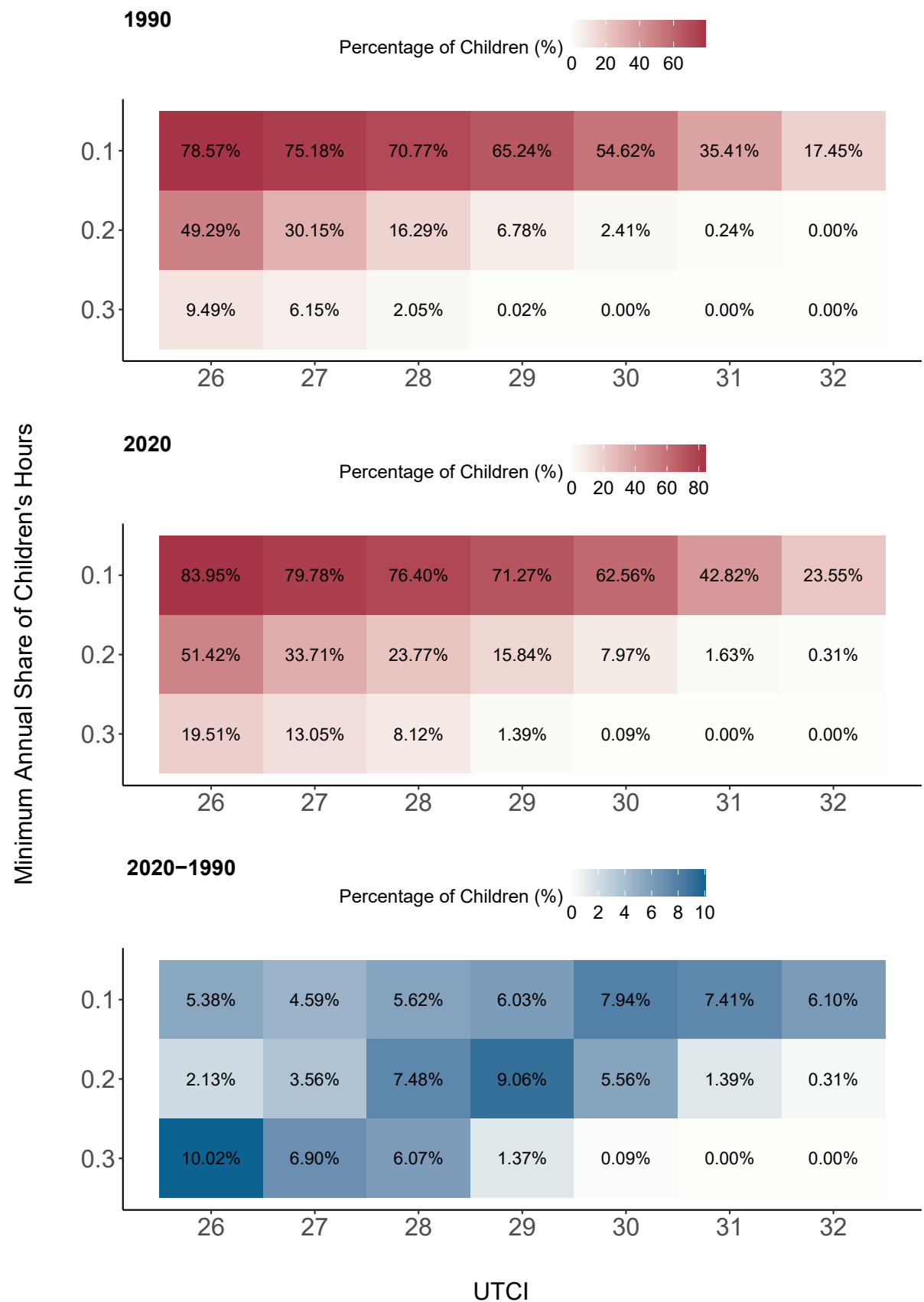
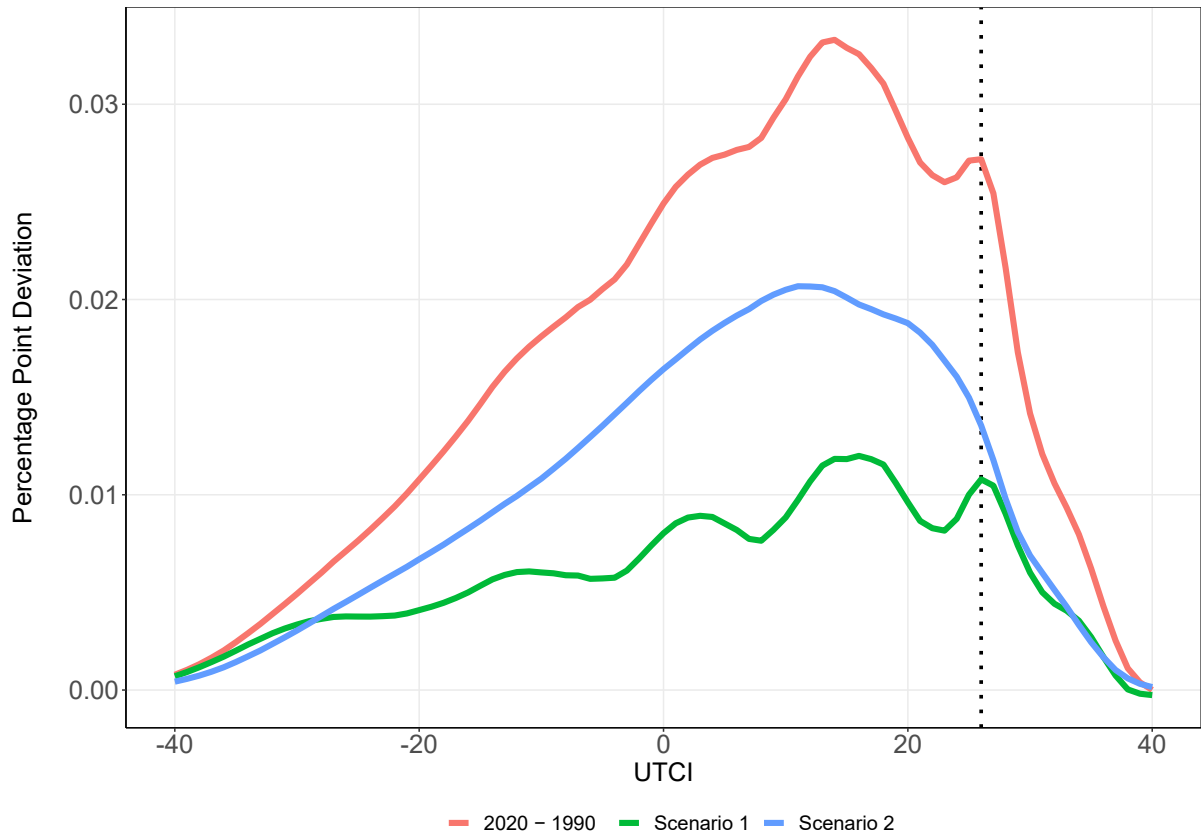


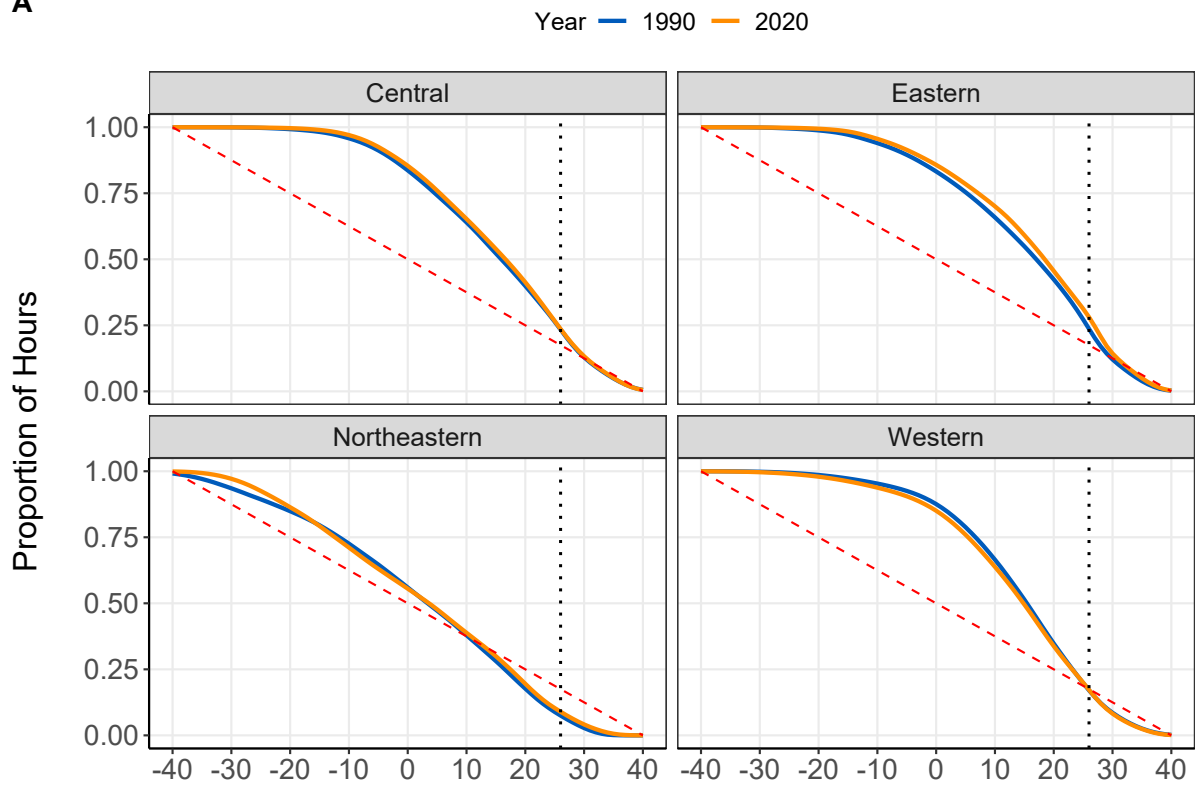
Figure 3: Counterfactual Decomposition Analyses



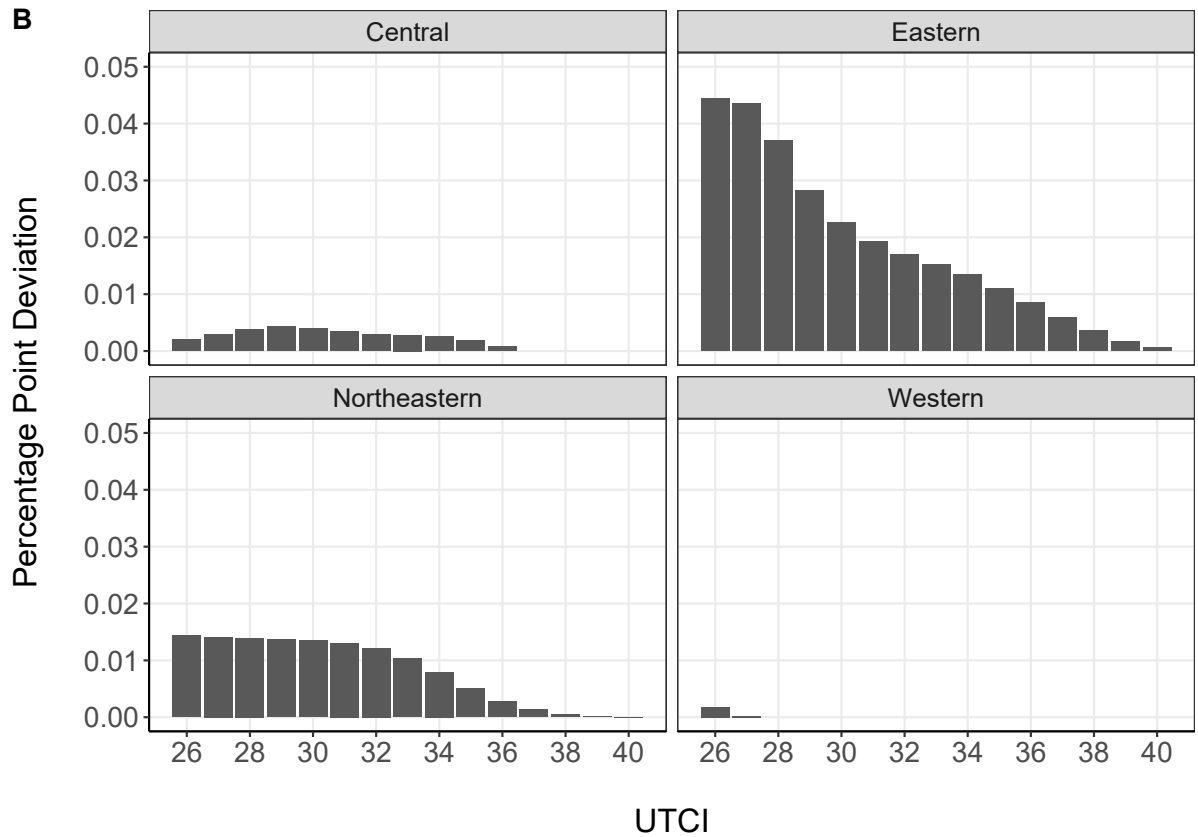
*Notes:* For all lines, the baseline reference is the children's share of total hour above certain threshold in 1990. The red line represents the percentage difference between children's shares of total hour above certain UTCI threshold and the baseline; In the first counterfactual decomposition, we use children population distribution in 2020 with the observed temperature in 1990. The blue line (Scenario 1) represents the percentage difference between the decomposition results with the baseline. In the second counterfactual decomposition, we use children population distribution in 1990 with the observed temperature in 2020. The green line (Scenario 2) represents the percentage difference between the decomposition results with the baseline.

Figure 4: Regional Differences in UTCI: Ages 0 to 14

**A**



**B**



Notes: A. Cumulative Density Curve by Regions. The vertical line indicates 26°C. B. Percentage Point Deviation from 2020 to 1990.

## ONLINE APPENDIX

### Rising Temperatures, Rising Risks: A Three-Decade Analysis of Children’s Heat Exposure in China (1990-2020)

Kai Feng, Marco M. Laghi, Jere R. Behrman, Emily Hannum, and Fan Wang

#### A Method—Population, Time, and Temperature Exposure

**Population, Time, and Temperature Exposure** We now formalize our temperature-exposure analysis framework across time and space. Specifically, let  $c_l(t)$  be the UTCI temperature experienced by an individual at a moment in time  $t$  at a location  $l$ . Between period  $\underline{t}$  and  $\underline{t} + \tau$ , the share of time that individuals at location  $l$  experience temperature  $c_l(t)$  over threshold  $c^*$  is,  $s_l(c^*, \underline{t}, \tau)$ :

$$s_l(c^*, \underline{t}, \tau) = \frac{1}{\tau} \int_{\underline{t}}^{\underline{t}+\tau} \mathbf{1}\{c_l(t) > c^*\} dt . \quad (1)$$

Additionally, let  $P_{\underline{t} \leq t < \underline{t} + \tau}(l|m)$  be the share of population for socio-demographic group  $m$  in a location  $l$ , among  $L$  locations in total between time  $\underline{t}$  and  $\underline{t} + \tau$  where:  $\sum_{l=1}^L P_{\underline{t} \leq t < \underline{t} + \tau}(l|m) = 1$ . Meaning that the population  $m$  at location  $l$  is experiencing exposure.

We compute two key sets of statistics. First, we compute  $S_m(c^*, \underline{t}, \tau)$ , which is for a particular interval of time, the average share of time individuals of a socio-demographic group  $m$  are exposed to temperature over threshold  $c^*$ :

$$S_m(c^*, \underline{t}, \tau) = \sum_{l=1}^L P_{\underline{t} \leq t < \underline{t} + \tau}(l|m) \cdot s_l(c^*, \underline{t}, \tau) . \quad (2)$$

Since  $S_m(c^*, t, \tau)$  is a share of time, it is between 0 and 1. In particular,  $\lim_{c^* \rightarrow \infty} S_m(c^*, t, \tau) = 0$  and  $\lim_{c^* \rightarrow -\infty} S_m(c^*, t, \tau) = 1$ . A key aggregate statistics for how temperature exposure is shifting between period  $t'$  and  $t$  is the following difference:

$$\Delta S_{m,t',t}(c^*, \tau) = S_m(c^*, t', \tau) - S_m(c^*, t, \tau) . \quad (3)$$

$\Delta S_{m,t',t}(c^*, \tau)$  is the population-weighted average increase in the share of time exposed to the potential key temperature threshold  $c^*$  between time  $t$  and  $t'$  for population group  $m$ .  $\Delta S_{m,t',t}(c^*, \tau)$  shifts due to both shifts in the population distribution as well as the distribu-



tion of temperature between  $t$  and  $t'$ , thus taking into account population and meteorological change.

Second, we compute the share of individuals at risk, based on a joint consideration of the relevant temperature threshold that might be considered risky for human development, and the share of time exposed to such temperature that would put individuals at risk of non-transitory impacts. Our objective here is not to provide what these thresholds should specifically be but to consider, for the first time, these two joint dimensions of risks in computing population-demographic-related exposure statistics. Specifically, let  $s^*(\tau)$  be a particular share-of-time threshold within span of time  $\tau$  above a specific temperature risk threshold. In our analysis, we use an  $s^*(\tau)$  of 0.10; 0.20; and 0.30 as shares of time above each UTCI temperature between 26 and 32. We define the  $m$ -,  $c^*$ -, and  $s^*$ -specific at risk measure  $\mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^*, t, \tau)$  between time  $t$  and  $t + \tau$  as:

$$\mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^*, t, \tau) = \sum_{l=1}^L P_{t \leq t_l < t_l + \tau}(l|m) \cdot \mathbf{1}\{s_l(c^*, t, \tau) > s^*(\tau)\}. \quad (4)$$

By construction,  $\mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^* = 0, t, \tau) \leq 1$  and  $\mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^* = 1, t, \tau) = 0$ . Additionally, the share of individuals experiencing greater than  $s^*$  share of time over  $c^*$  threshold converges to 0 as  $c^*$  increases:  $\lim_{c^* \rightarrow \infty} \mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^*, t, \tau) = 0$ .

For the socio-demographic group indexed by  $m$ , given temperature threshold  $c^*$  and share of time threshold  $s^*$ , the percentage increase over time in the share of individuals from this group at risk of excess heat exposure is:

$$\Delta \mathcal{R}_{m,t',t}(c^*, s^*, \tau) = \mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^*, t', \tau) - \mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^*, t, \tau). \quad (5)$$

In our empirical application  $t$  is 1990 and,  $t'$  is 2020,  $\tau$  is one calendar year, and  $m$  is children between age 0 to 14. Additionally, we approximate continuous time with hourly measurements. As an example,  $\Delta \mathcal{R}_{\text{children}, 2020, 1990}$  with  $c^* = 28$  and  $s^* = 0.1$  provides the change in the percentage points of children exposed to temperature over 28 degrees for greater than 10 percent of their time during a year.

One important aspect of our framework is that computing  $\mathcal{R}_m(c^*, s^*, t, \tau)$  and  $\Delta \mathcal{R}_{m,t',t}(c^*, s^*, \tau)$  do not require the use of harmonized geographic data overtime. This is often a constraint in the analysis of temperature changes over time, due to shifting boundaries of administrative boundaries, especially across large spans of time. In our analysis, the unit of interest is  $m$ , the

socio-demographic group; at times  $t$  and  $t'$ , thus the geographical boundaries can shift.

**Existing literature** The existing literature focuses on computing location-specific temperature measurements, focused on overall averages, averages of minimums, and averages of maximums. In the context of the notations that we are using, this means computing:

A large number of papers focused on climatic changes across locations compute location-specific means between times  $\underline{t}$  and  $\underline{t} + \tau$ , and use  $E_{l,\underline{t},\tau}$  for comparison across locations:

$$E_{l,\underline{t},\tau}(c) = \frac{1}{\tau} \int_{\underline{t}}^{\underline{t}+\tau} c_l(t) dt . \quad (6)$$

Additionally, by dividing the interval of time  $\tau$  into  $M$  sub-periods (e.g., days), some paper focus on analyzing the averages of minimum and maximum. Specifically, given  $M$  sub-periods,  $E_{l,\underline{t},\tau,M}^{\max}$  is the average of sub-period-specific maximum temperature between  $\underline{t}$  and  $\underline{t} + \tau$ :

$$E_{l,\underline{t},\tau,M}^{\max} = \sum_{m=1}^M \frac{1}{M} \max \left( c_l(t) \cdot \mathbb{1} \left( \underline{t} + \frac{\tau}{M} \cdot (m-1) \leq t < \frac{\tau}{M} \cdot (m) \right) \right) . \quad (7)$$

And  $E_{l,\underline{t},\tau,M}^{\min}$  is the average of the sub-period-specific minima:

$$E_{l,\underline{t},\tau,M}^{\min} = \sum_{m=1}^M \frac{1}{M} \max \left( c_l(t) \cdot \mathbb{1} \left( \underline{t} + \frac{\tau}{M} \cdot (m-1) \leq t < \frac{\tau}{M} \cdot (m) \right) \right) . \quad (8)$$

Various papers in the existing scientific literature focus on comparing these statistics over time between period  $t$  and  $t'$  to study changes in climatic conditions across time for different locations.

In the social science literature, the focus has been on estimating the effects of temperature exposures  $E_{l,\underline{t},\tau}^{\text{mean}}$ ,  $E_{l,\underline{t},\tau,M}^{\max}$ ,  $E_{l,\underline{t},\tau,M}^{\min}$  on outcomes related to human capacities ranging from educational attainment, health outcomes, to productivity outcomes.

Rather than using  $c_l(t)$  directly, a subset of the literature in social science computes the above mentioned statistics with  $c_l^z(t)$ , which are based on location-specific deviations from prior trends, sometimes computed in standard deviation units, for example:  $c_l^z(t) = \frac{E_{l,\underline{t},\tau}^{\text{mean}} - E_{l,\underline{t}^*,\tau}^{\text{mean}}}{\sqrt{\text{VAR}_{l,\underline{t}^*,\tau}}}$

## B Data

### B.1 ERA5 Data Details

ERA5-HEAT, produced by the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF), represents the fifth generation of atmospheric reanalyses of global climate. Covering the period from 1979 to the present, ERA5-HEAT comprises hourly gridded maps of Universal Thermal Climate Index (UTCI) at  $0.25^\circ \times 0.25^\circ$  spatial resolution. The dataset is publicly accessible through the Copernicus Climate Change Service's Climate Data Store (CDS).

The UTCI is widely used index to assess the human-perceived environment based on atmospheric conditions, integrating atmospheric parameters like temperature, humidity, wind speed, and solar radiation. UTCI is expressed in degrees Celsius ( $^\circ\text{C}$ ), and it provides a measure of how cold or hot people might feel under prevailing environmental conditions. The index categorizes thermal stress into different classes with corresponding thresholds, which are as follows:

Extreme cold stress: UTCI below  $-40^\circ\text{C}$ ; Very strong cold stress: UTCI  $-40^\circ\text{C}$  to  $-27^\circ\text{C}$ ; Strong cold stress: UTCI  $-27^\circ\text{C}$  to  $-13^\circ\text{C}$ ; Moderate cold stress: UTCI  $-13^\circ\text{C}$  to  $0^\circ\text{C}$ ; No thermal stress: UTCI  $0^\circ\text{C}$  to  $26^\circ\text{C}$ ; Moderate heat stress: UTCI  $26^\circ\text{C}$  to  $32^\circ\text{C}$ ; Strong heat stress: UTCI  $32^\circ\text{C}$  to  $38^\circ\text{C}$ ; Very strong heat stress: UTCI  $38^\circ\text{C}$  to  $46^\circ\text{C}$ ; Extreme heat stress: UTCI above  $46^\circ\text{C}$ ;

### B.2 Population data input specification

In each census year, we determine the population distribution by dividing the population of each age and gender group in each county by the entire population in the census year. For our analysis of children's exposure, we focus on the age group between 0 to 14 regardless of gender.

**Census 1990** We obtained 2369 geographical units at the county level nested in 31 provincial administrative regions. We only include mainland China and did not include special administrative regions. Within each county, we have population data by gender and age.

**Census 2020** Tabulation on 2020 China Population Census by Count We obtained 2853 geographical units at the county level nested in 31 provincial administrative regions. We only include mainland China and did not include special administrative regions. Within each county,

we have population data by gender and age.

## **C Method Data Framework**

### **C.1 ERA5-HEAT data input specification**

We employ China's far-east, far-west, far-south, and far-north points as spatial references to extract a gridded map from ERA5-HEAT covering the entire mainland China. The data is downloaded monthly and yearly, and we consolidate it into a year-specific UTCI data file. Each coordinate in the UTCI data file includes hourly UTCI values from January 1 to December 31 of that year.

### **C.2 Population data input specification**

We have county-level demographic data from the census tabulations. In each census file, we have one unique identification number for each county. Each county includes population data by age group and gender in the corresponding census year. In our analysis, we keep only the children population, defined as individuals aged 0 to 15 within each county.

### **C.3 Specifying key files**

We obtain the geography boundary for each county from the census shapefile. Note that the county boundary may change from census to census. We had 2853 counties in 2020 and we had 2369 counties in 1990. We identify the grid coordinates from ERA5-HEAT that fall within the county boundary. In each census year, we create a key file that includes a unique identification number for each county, and all the coordinates within the county boundary. This key file helps us to merge the ERA5-HEAT data with the county-level census data.

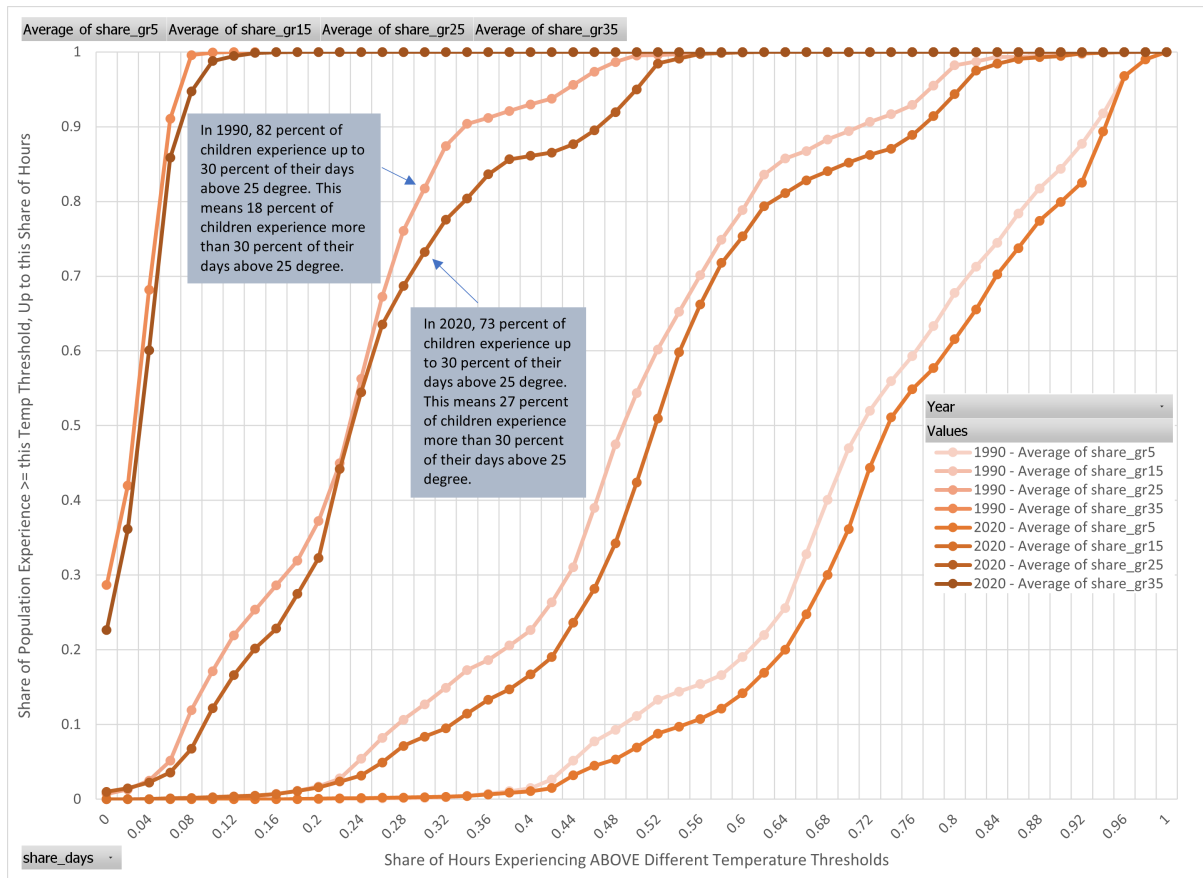
## **D Additional Results**

### **D.1 Additional Inequality Results**

Temperature exposure risk thresholds in general are a relatively ambiguous topic. Further, for child-experienced risk thresholds, [vanos2015children](#); [hellden2021climateempty citation](#) note a lack of data inputs accounting for child health and behaviors that could be used to create accurate risk thresholds. While child-oriented work such as [huang2021outdooreempty citation](#)

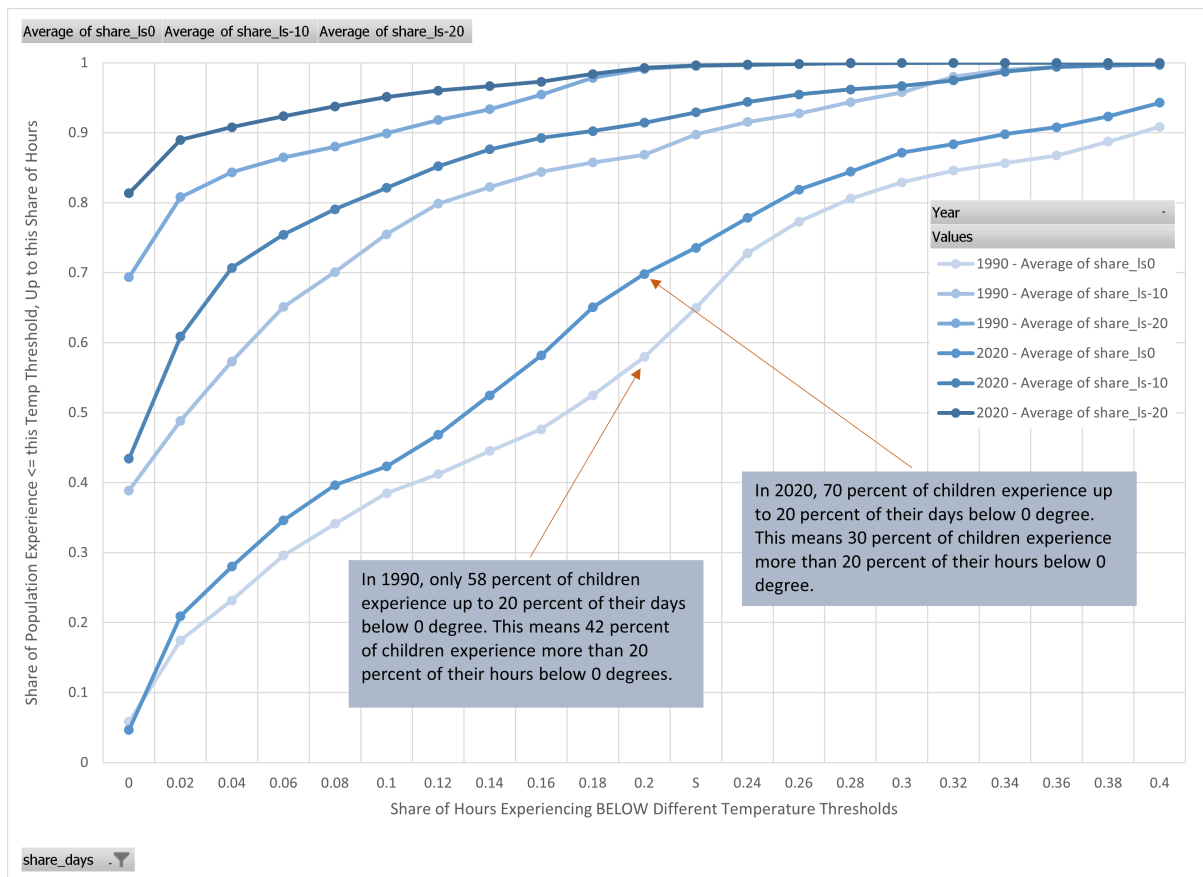
does try to account for this, focusing on a case study of a children's park in the cold Xi'an, China; limited scope endangers generalizability.

Figure D.1: Hourly Heat Exposure for Children over Time



Notes: The figure above depicts the percentage of children experiencing temperatures above certain thresholds of 5, 15, 25, and 35 degrees C in the years 1990 and 2020.

Figure D.2: Hourly Cold Exposure for Children over Time



Notes: Figure B above depicts the percentage of children experiencing temperatures below certain thresholds of 0, -10, -20 degrees C in the years 1990 and 2020.