

Extreme Heat Fuels National Prison Crisis

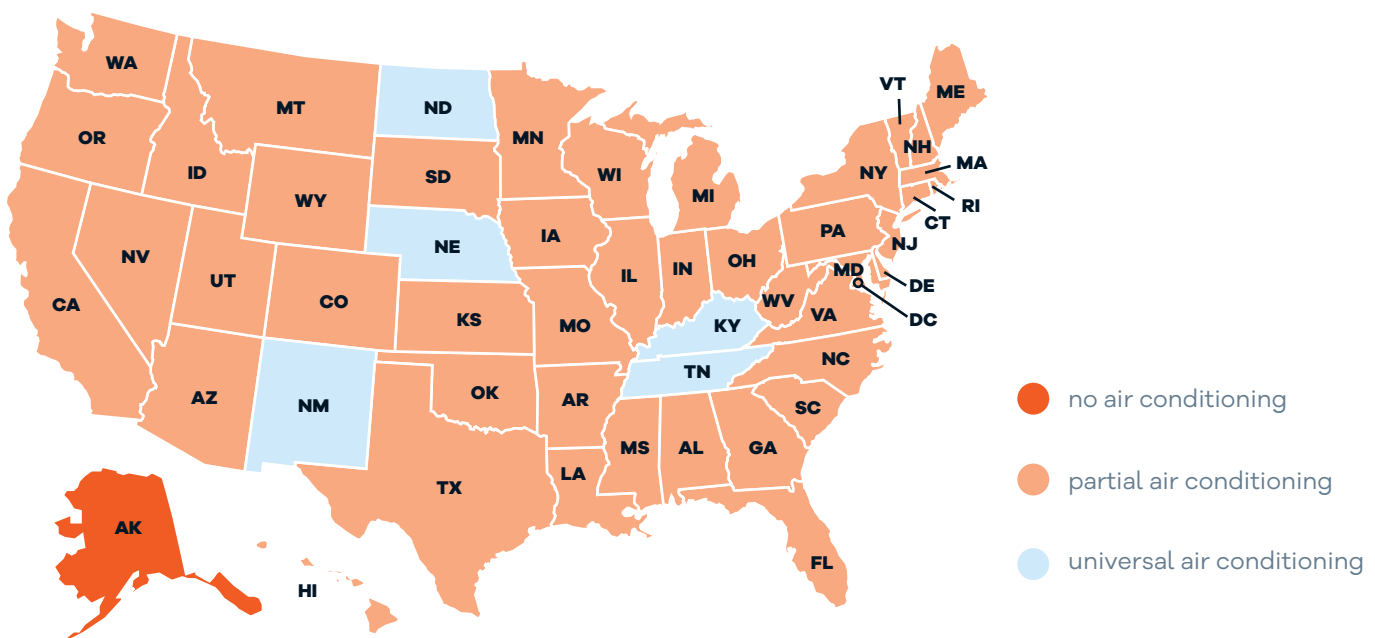
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As temperatures have risen across the globe, extreme summertime heat and humidity have become a growing problem throughout the United States.

Exposure to extreme heat is particularly harmful in prisons, where both corrections professionals and incarcerated people are exposed to life-threatening conditions that exacerbate the ongoing understaffing and overcrowding crisis.

Understaffing and overcrowding in turn make it harder to address extreme heat, especially in facilities that lack air conditioning, since most mitigation strategies such as delivering ice or water require proper staffing levels. **Unfortunately, 44 states, including many of the hottest states in the South and Southwest, do not provide universal access to air conditioning in their prisons.**

Figure 1: Access to air conditioning in prisons



Source: USA Today investigation along with additional reporting analyzed by the Appeal

In fact, the lack of air conditioning and modern HVAC systems in prisons is directly contributing to the dangerous working conditions that are driving high turnover and vacancy rates, low employee morale, and poor physical and mental health outcomes for corrections professionals. Research conducted by the Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign shows that [the number of corrections officers working in state prisons fell 23 percent between 2017 and 2022](#) – outpacing the prison population decline over the same time period.

From 2020 to 2023, two-thirds of prison facilities experienced at least one day with an average temperature exceeding 85 degrees; nearly one million incarcerated people and more than 220,000 correctional employees were impacted. These days of excessive heat have serious consequences for the safety of our prisons. One study found that an [unsafe heat index increases violence by upwards of 20 percent](#), a problem that affects incarcerated people and those who work in correctional facilities alike.

Extreme heat also comes with severe risks to the physical health and wellbeing of incarcerated people and corrections professionals. The National Weather Service [advises caution for anyone exposed to temperatures above 80°F](#) for prolonged periods or engaging in physical activity, and warns of dangerous heat disorders at temperatures above 90°F. One study found that a [10°F increase in temperature correlates with a 5.2% increase in mortality for incarcerated people, with even higher spikes during heat waves](#). These effects on physical health are disproportionately felt by [the growing number of elderly people in the aging prison population](#).

[Prisons in Florida, Texas, California, Georgia, and Illinois accounted for nearly half of the exposure \(46%\) to extreme heat](#) and there were prisons in California, Nevada, Arizona, and Texas that had at least 65 days with temperatures averaging more than 85 degrees in their prison facilities. But the problem is not limited to states in the South and Southwest. States in the Northeast, Pacific Northwest, and Midwest experienced the most days with extreme heat that was an anomaly from normal temperatures.

The Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign is built on a recognition that the fates of corrections professionals and incarcerated people are intertwined. The issue of extreme heat is a prime example of that and shows why the prison crisis should demand the immediate attention of lawmakers at both the state and federal level. This brief outlines the harmful impact of extreme heat, as well as how it interacts with understaffing and overcrowding, and highlights common-sense solutions that will make everyone who lives and works in prisons safer.

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THE IMPACT OF EXTREME HEAT ON PRISON CONDITIONS

Extreme heat and the lack of air conditioning and proper ventilation in prisons leads to dangerous conditions that increase the risk for health problems, violence, and death for corrections professionals and incarcerated people. These problems are compounded by deteriorating prison infrastructure and existing problems such as overcrowding, poor medical care, isolation, and inadequate mental health treatment.

A literature review conducted by the Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign found that:

- **Violence increases dramatically with extreme heat.** [One study](#) found that days with unsafe heat index levels increase daily violent interactions by 20% and the probability of any violence by 18%. In Texas, one of the states with the most extreme heat, [assaults during the summer months increase five times more in prisons without air conditioning than in climate-controlled facilities](#).

- **Heat kills.** [A 10°F increase in temperature correlates with a 5.2% increase in mortality for incarcerated people, with even higher spikes during heat waves.](#) In Texas, [approximately 13% of deaths in prison during the summer](#) may be attributable to extreme heat days.
- **The prison population is aging and more vulnerable to extreme heat.** [The number of elderly people in prison has increased dramatically over the past 30 years](#) from 3% of the federal and state prison population in 1991 to 15% in 2021. Extreme heat disproportionately affects this population since they are more likely to have [underlying health conditions that put them at higher risk for heat-related illness and death.](#)
- **Poor ventilation spreads disease.** [Inadequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning \(HVAC\) systems enable the spread of communicable diseases](#) including influenza, tuberculosis, and COVID-19, affecting both incarcerated people and corrections professionals who return to their communities each night.
- **Aging infrastructure compounds the problem.** [Most state prison systems have decades-old infrastructure that was not designed for modern HVAC systems](#) or can't maintain appropriate temperatures, especially in states with extreme temperature fluctuations. While upgrading old facilities or building new prisons comes with a high price tag, heat-related medical emergencies, increased violence, and overtime pay for those who work in correctional facilities also carry their own costs.
- **Excessive heat in prison is no longer a regional problem.** Many parts of the country are now experiencing longer stretches of high temperatures, including facilities in states that were not previously affected by extreme heat. According to researchers at MIT, [prisons with the highest temperature fluctuations from the historical record were in the Pacific Northwest, the Northeast, and parts of the Midwest.](#)
- **Many of the states that are disproportionately impacted by extreme heat are the same states that are already struggling with severe understaffing.** [Prior research by the Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign](#) found that southern states with the most extreme heat such as Texas, Louisiana, and Florida have also experienced the sharpest declines in the number of corrections officers.

THE DANGEROUS INTERPLAY BETWEEN UNDERSTAFFING AND EXTREME HEAT

Extreme heat creates dangerous working conditions that contribute directly to the recruitment and retention challenges that are driving the understaffing crisis. Even facilities with heat mitigation policies on paper cannot implement them effectively without adequate staffing levels. This creates a vicious cycle where extreme heat worsens already difficult working conditions, driving more employee departures and higher vacancy rates, which further reduces the capacity of corrections professionals to respond during heat and other extreme weather emergencies.

Below are some of the ways understaffing exacerbates heat emergencies:

- **Emergency Response Capacity:** Heat-related medical emergencies require an immediate response. In understaffed facilities, response times increase and situations that arise from extreme heat can become life-threatening.
- **Basic Mitigation Measures:** Distribution of ice and water, monitoring vulnerable populations, and conducting welfare checks all require sufficient staffing levels.
- **Medication Management:** People taking medications require closer monitoring during extreme heat events, but understaffing often means delayed medical attention when time is of the essence.

SOLUTIONS THAT PROTECT EVERYONE IN PRISONS

While [air conditioning has been shown to effectively eliminate heat-related mortality](#), [44 states do not provide universal access to air conditioning in prisons](#). A federal judge recently ruled that [extreme heat in Texas prisons amounts to cruel and unusual punishment](#), with temperatures in some facilities reaching as high as 130°F, but [a bill that would have required air conditioning in all Texas prisons failed to pass this spring for the third consecutive time](#).

Legislative inaction is not unique to Texas, however, and is playing out nationwide despite the worsening threat of extreme heat. However, some states have made progress in recent years. Legislatures in [North Carolina](#) and [Arizona](#) have both approved plans to install air conditioning throughout their prison systems by 2026 and have made important strides towards that goal. This represents much-needed progress that other states should replicate.

In addition to equipping all prison facilities with modern HVAC systems that provide adequate cooling and ventilation, **state legislatures and departments of corrections should adopt and implement heat-mitigation plans that include increased access to water stations, fans, portable cooling units, and ice during extreme heat emergencies**. States can also adopt HVAC standards that align with OSHA recommendations and other professional guidelines, and ensure that any new facilities include modern HVAC systems.

Increasing staffing levels and reducing overcrowding are also a critical component of addressing the impact of extreme heat. To accomplish these goals, [the Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign recommends that states prioritize improving the health and wellness of corrections professionals and find ways to safely reduce the prison population](#).



CONCLUSION

Correctional facilities across the United States are experiencing an intersecting crisis of understaffing, overcrowding, and deteriorating infrastructure. Extreme heat events are colliding with these problems to create conditions that endanger everyone inside prison walls. Every year, stories of extreme heat behind bars make headlines, but the policy response continues to fall far short of the crisis.

Through the Safer Prisons, Safer Communities campaign, we are working to bring attention to how extreme heat in prisons worsens prison understaffing and overcrowding. For too long, corrections professionals and incarcerated people have been pitted against one another while the safety and wellbeing of both groups has suffered. This is perhaps most strikingly true when it comes to the dangerous conditions created by extreme heat.

If policymakers and administrators do not act to upgrade prison facilities and implement heat mitigation plans, the problems of understaffing and overcrowding, along with the harmful impact they have on correctional employees and incarcerated people, will only get worse. **The time for action is now and there are practical, bipartisan reforms that are both necessary and possible.**

Safer Prisons, Safer Communities was founded in 2024 by One Voice United and FAMM. Driven by the dire conditions inside our nation's prisons, the campaign brings together seemingly unlikely allies to advocate for reforms that will improve the lives of corrections professionals and incarcerated people alike, enhance rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities, and strengthen community safety.

One Voice United is dedicated to elevating the voices of corrections professionals and staff in national conversations about corrections and the criminal justice system. We are working to shift the conversation from one that perpetuates tension between incarcerated individuals, corrections employees, and budget constraints to one that is centered on protecting the safety and interests of all who are impacted by the corrections system.

FAMM's mission is to create a more fair and effective justice system that respects our American values of individual accountability and dignity while keeping our communities safe. We do this by making sure people are treated equally and sentenced proportional to their offense; eliminating disparities based on race and ethnicity; ensuring people are incarcerated close to their homes in order to maintain important family bonds; and advocating for correctional facilities that are safe and humane, provide appropriate medical care, and offer educational, vocational, and rehabilitative programming.