

Addressing Extreme Heat in Rental Housing in Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT

As climate change drives rising temperatures, urban heat has become a critical public health and housing justice issue. Renters—particularly low-income tenants—are often forced to endure unsafe indoor heat without access to effective cooling. Extreme heat already kills more people annually in the United States than any other natural disaster, with most fatalities occurring indoors. Yet renters are constrained by leasing agreements, building conditions, and landlord restrictions that limit their ability to mitigate heat. Despite this crisis, policy discussions about cooling and climate resilience frequently exclude low-income tenants—the very people most affected.

This paper centers tenant perspectives on extreme heat in rental housing, using Los Angeles as a case study. Through focus groups and surveys of low-income tenants in South Los Angeles, I explore how communities experience and respond to extreme indoor heat, and what barriers shape their access to cooling. Highlighting the recent victory in winning a right to cooling and indoor temperature threshold in Los Angeles County, I examine how community-based organizations can mobilize around climate resilience. The paper’s findings reveal that tenants face multiple barriers to staying cool, including inadequate housing conditions and limited power to adopt cooling mechanisms due to landlords.

Introduction

Extreme 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 5.0°F and 4.2°F, (Tamrazian 2008) respectively, and the city is projected to experience 26 days above 92.6°F by 2050 (ClimateCheck 2025). 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 (Kim, Sun, and Irazabal 2021).

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 (Adams-Fuller 2023), and nearly half of fatalities related to heat occur indoors (Kutz 2024). Numerous analyses of past extreme-heat events demonstrate the greatest risk factor in heat-related fatalities is the lack of access to A/C (Ahn and Uejio 2022).

Low-income people of color are disproportionately burdened by the effects of climate change and extreme heat (Jesdale, Morello-Frosch, and Cushing 2013). A lack of indoor cooling exacerbates existing health risks, especially for vulnerable populations like children and seniors (Ahn and Uejio 2022). For tenants, the situation is especially dire, as many do not have access to adequate cooling options (Scott, Grineski, Collins, and Adkins 2025). Access to in-home A/C is far less prevalent among renters than homeowners (Mann and Schuetz 2022). Landlords sometimes prohibit tenants from installing A/C units, leaving those residents particularly vulnerable during heat waves. Despite the importance of access to cooling, relatively little research has examined barriers that prevent tenants from obtaining or using A/C beyond

affordability, especially with regard to landlord restrictions, lease provisions, and housing conditions. In Los Angeles, the average extreme heat day 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 (Lopez 2023).

During extreme-heat events, the prevailing guidance is to remain indoors in air-conditioned spaces. The American Red Cross (2025) advises: “If you do not have A/C or if there is a power outage, find locations where you can stay cool.” 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 (Harty 2024). Research shows that people without A/C are more than 50% more likely to face these types of heat-related health issues or hospitalization compared to those with room A/C (e.g., a window unit, portable unit, or wall-mounted unit) (Honda 1995). 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 (Barreca et al. 2016).

Several strategies are commonly proposed as alternatives to A/C, yet research shows that most provide limited protection during extreme heat events. Fans, for example, do not lower ambient temperature but simply circulate existing air (Romitti, Wing, Spangler, and Wellenius 2022). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) advises against using fans when temperatures exceed 90°F because circulating hot air can accelerate overheating and dehydration (Gagnon and Crandall 2017). Weatherization strategies such as improved insulation, air sealing, and cool roofs are also frequently promoted as climate adaptation measures. However, a 2024 study modeling 50,000 representative homes in Los Angeles found that “cooling, not weatherization, ensures access to livable indoor conditions” (Sandoval 2024).

Other passive cooling strategies show similarly modest effects. Reflective cool roofs can reduce indoor temperatures in buildings without air conditioning by roughly 2°F to 6°F (EPA 2025), and in some top-floor units by as much as 10°F (NRDC 2025). These measures can reduce cooling demand by lowering the amount of heat entering from the roof. Tree planting offers another mitigation strategy, with a 2021 TreePeople study in Southeast Los Angeles County finding that homes with moderate to high tree canopy were about 1°F cooler indoors during hot days. Although even small reductions may lower heat-related mortality, the cooling effect remains minor compared to the roughly 20°F reduction that air conditioning can achieve. Cooling centers provide temporary refuge during extreme heat, yet their effectiveness is limited by restricted hours and accessibility (Fraser, Chester, and Bondank 2016). Los Angeles typically operates only a handful of dedicated cooling centers across a large geographic area, and many residents without cars face significant barriers reaching them. As a result, these alternatives may reduce heat exposure but cannot reliably maintain safe indoor temperatures during extreme heat events.

While a growing body of research documents the health impacts of extreme heat, evaluates the efficacy of different cooling methods, and identifies renters as a vulnerable population, considerably less attention has been paid to how renters themselves experience heat exposure and navigate cooling decisions within the constraints of rental housing. No study has provided insight into the lived realities of tenants and the barriers they face in accessing and using A/C beyond affordability, and as a result, we know relatively little about how factors like landlord restrictions, housing conditions, and tenant-landlord dynamics could shape renters’ access to cooling.

This gap is particularly important in Los Angeles, where a large renter population, aging multifamily housing stock, persistent socioeconomic inequality, and rising temperatures have created what can be understood as an extreme heat crisis. This study addresses these gaps by examining how low-income renters in Los Angeles experience extreme heat, how they navigate access to cooling. Drawing on focus groups with low-income renters, the study contributes to the literature by centering tenant perspectives and documenting the everyday realities of living without adequate cooling in a warming city. By moving beyond quantitative measures of heat exposure to examine housing-related barriers that shape access to air conditioning, this research provides new insights into the relationship between housing and climate vulnerability. The findings have implications for climate policy, habitability standards, tenant protections, and policies aimed at ensuring equitable access to cooling in rental housing.

Methodology

This paper uses focus groups to assess extreme heat conditions in rental housing and barriers to cooling. Focus groups were selected because they provide an opportunity to explore how tenants discuss and interpret experiences of extreme heat, housing conditions, and cooling strategies. I hosted four bilingual in-person focus groups (N=58). Participants were largely members of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), a community-based economic justice organization in South Los Angeles, to learn from tenant perspectives and ground policy recommendations in the lived experiences of those most affected by extreme heat and inadequate access to in-home cooling. Focus-group participants were compensated with a \$75 Visa gift card for their time. All names are pseudonyms.

Three of the focus groups were held at the SAJE office in South Los Angeles. Participants in these focus groups were members of SAJE recruited by SAJE organizers to participate. Recruitment involved SAJE organizers (staff) calling their membership list and inviting each person to any of the 3 dates. A third focus group was held in the parking lot of an apartment building in Echo Park with members of the Los Angeles Tenants Union's (LATU) Echo Park chapter. All participants were primarily low-income tenants of color, which is the main demographic of both the SAJE and LATU memberships.

The four focus groups mostly comprised low-income tenants with long tenures in their rentals. Of the 53 who participated in a follow-up survey, approximately 41% indicated household incomes below \$15,000. Only one participant reported a household income above \$75,000, and just four earned more than \$50,000. Additionally, 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 over 20 years; one participant had resided in the same rental unit for 62 years, since 1963, while another lived in the same apartment for more than four decades. The average rent of participants is \$1,345, compared to the city average of \$2,745. Participants reported somewhat limited access to transportation: 49% relied primarily on public transit, compared to 47% who used a car.

The four focus groups were designed to fill in a gap in current policy research on extreme heat by recording tenants experiences of extreme heat. 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 the office of SAJE 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. All participants signed a consent form, and the names of focus-group participants have been pseudonymized here.

Policy Responses

Lack of cooling in rental units is now 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 (Samayoa 2022); many of the fatalities were people at home alone without A/C (McKinnon and Simpson 2022). The following year, Oregon passed Senate Bill 1536 granting renters the right to have cooling in their homes; landlords can no longer impose restrictions on tenants' ability to install portable A/C units (The Oregonian 2022). 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 (Redelmeier 2022). 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 (Turner 2023). Other cities have proactively mandated indoor cooling regulations to prevent such tragedies.

Governments have developed a variety of approaches to address indoor temperatures, 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 will not provide it. The majority of ordinances—adopted in at least 10 cities—require active cooling in all rooms, some rooms, or during the hottest part of the year.¹ 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.

In August 2025, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors adopted an indoor air temperature threshold, the Maximum Indoor Temperature Threshold, applying only to unincorporated communities (Wagner 2025). It requires landlords to ensure their properties can maintain 82°F or lower by 2027. It also gives tenants the right to cool their own homes. 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. The Los Angeles City Council is in the process of adopting a similar policy, after voting to study its potential impacts in February 2025 (Rainey 2025).

Focus Groups: What Do Renters Want?

On a hot Wednesday evening in August 2024, 21 renters gathered at Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (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

¹ Austin, TX, Baton Rouge, LA, Chicago, IL, Dallas, TX, Montgomery County, MD, Palm Springs, CA, Phoenix, AZ, Tempe, AZ, Tucson and South Tucson, AZ have all adopted active cooling mandates.

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 (Orona 2025). Among the additional challenges: a quarter of residents in the area live in poverty, tree canopy is sparse—average of 13% compared to the citywide average of 21% (Seidman 2024)—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.

The 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 Rios² 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 could not 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.

Focus Group Participants

Focus-group participants’ access to cooling equipment in their homes was limited. Only 37% reported having any form of A/C, and just two had central A/C. Of the three individuals

² Lucia Rios is a pseudonym. All names are pseudonyms.

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.

Common Focus Group Themes

Across the four focus groups, several themes emerged as critical concerns. The following section explores common issues 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.

Tenants and their households suffer negative health impacts from heat. The health effects of extreme heat on focus group participants were wide-ranging. “Extreme heat gives me a headache, a severe headache,” said Rowena Mendoza. Cruz reported “bloody noses” and constant dizziness. “Last year, the little one got heat rashes,” said Morales, referring to her five-year-old son. “His doctor had to write a note to hand to the landlord.” 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 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.”

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, referring to a portable window unit while 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. 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.’” 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,” said Morales. “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.”

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 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.

Some 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 renters from asking for A/C. Many tenants said the biggest barrier to asking for A/C was fear of retaliation, rent increases, or even 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.

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.”

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. Sandra 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.”

Taken together, the focus groups reveal that extreme heat is experienced not simply as a weather event but as a housing and habitability issue. Participants consistently described a chain of interconnected challenges: inadequate cooling leads to adverse physical and mental health impacts; attempts to secure cooling are constrained by landlord restrictions, fear of retaliation, and affordability concerns; and alternative coping strategies often require additional financial expenditures while providing only limited relief. Notably, participants did not view portable or window A/C units as equivalent substitutes for whole-home cooling, frequently describing them as ineffective, incompatible with their housing conditions, or unusable due to building infrastructure limitations. Across the focus groups, access to adequate cooling emerged as a question of housing quality, tenant rights, and health protection rather than personal preference or convenience. While participants repeatedly described substantial costs associated with both operating A/C and seeking cooling outside the home, this study was not designed to quantify those expenditures. Future research should compare the direct costs of providing cooling in

rental housing with the economic costs currently borne by tenants, including electricity bills, transportation expenses, food purchases, parking fees, gym memberships, lost productivity, and heat-related health care utilization.

Winning a Right to Cooling in Los Angeles

The timing of these focus groups coincided with Los Angeles County's policy process to adopt an indoor cooling ordinance, a process that began in 2023. Earlier that year, members of SAJE's Climate Justice Member Committee, which focuses on residential building decarbonization and housing conditions, identified extreme heat as a priority issue affecting tenants. Around the same time, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors adopted a motion directing the County to investigate the feasibility of establishing an indoor air temperature standard, initiating a stakeholder engagement process that included tenants, landlords, advocates, and technical experts. SAJE members actively participated throughout this process. Engagement began with informational interviews conducted by the County's consultant and continued through a series of stakeholder meetings held separately for tenants and landlords. Although these meetings were organized by stakeholder group, SAJE members participated across multiple forums to ensure that tenants' lived experiences and concerns remained central to the discussion. Many of the experiences they shared during these meetings were later echoed and expanded upon in the focus groups.

By the time the focus groups were conducted, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, which had been tasked with developing recommendations for the ordinance, had proposed an indoor air temperature threshold of either 82°F or 86°F. Focus group participants, who were also SAJE members actively engaged in the County's stakeholder process, consistently expressed opposition to an indoor air temperature threshold as the primary regulatory mechanism. The perspectives articulated during these focus groups were carried directly into the policy process and communicated to Board of Supervisors staff through meetings, verbal public testimony at hearings, and written public comments. Drawing on the experiences shared during the focus groups, participants argued that a temperature threshold alone would not adequately protect tenants from dangerous indoor heat. Instead, they advocated for a requirement that all rental housing provide cooling equipment. Their demand was for the County to mirror the California Health and Safety Code, which requires rental dwellings to include heating equipment in order to be considered habitable. Tenants argued that, given the realities of climate change and rising temperatures, access to cooling should likewise be treated as an essential component of habitability.

In July 2025, only weeks before the ordinance was scheduled for final adoption, a Supervisorial office introduced a last-minute amendment proposing a two-tiered system that would increase the indoor temperature threshold for a subset of properties from the proposed universal 82°F standard to 86°F. Under this proposal, some property owners would only be required to maintain indoor temperatures at or below 86°F, while others would remain subject to the 82°F standard. Tenants strongly opposed the amendment. Many had already concluded through their own experiences that even 82°F was insufficient to protect residents during extreme heat events and argued that temperatures closer to 75°F would better reflect safe and habitable indoor conditions.

The proposed amendment required tenants to rapidly shift their advocacy strategy. Rather than continuing to prioritize their longer-term demand for a universal cooling equipment

requirement, they redirected their efforts toward defending the establishment of a universal 82°F standard. SAJE organizers, members, and coalition partners quickly mobilized in response. An email campaign directed at the Supervisorial office responsible for the amendment generated more than 200 messages within two days. Advocates also organized more than 30 people to attend a Board of Supervisors meeting on a day when the ordinance was not even scheduled for consideration, demonstrating sustained public attention and signaling that tenants were prepared to continue organizing if necessary. Faced with this pressure, the Supervisorial office ultimately withdrew the proposed amendment. When the Board held its final vote on the ordinance, more than 100 people attended the meeting to express their support. Participants included SAJE members alongside coalition partners representing environmental justice organizations, green trades labor groups, and broader environmental advocacy organizations, illustrating how tenant-led organizing shaped the final stages of the policy process.

Despite this mobilization, the final ordinance includes a significant exception for what are defined as “small landlords,” or property owners who own fewer than ten residential units. Under this provision, these landlords are only required to ensure that one room in the unit can reach a temperature of 82°F by 2027. This exception was introduced at the last minute by Supervisor Janice Hahn of the 4th District and was supported by landlord lobbying organizations (Wagner 2025). The change raises concerns over whether the policy will be implemented inequitably across the county. In South Los Angeles, many housing units are located in older buildings that are owned by small landlords. Residents in these neighborhoods are already disproportionately affected by extreme heat due to historical patterns of disinvestment, limited tree canopy, and aging housing infrastructure.

The ordinance also established a formal right to cooling, ensuring that tenants can no longer be prohibited by their landlords from installing A/C or other cooling devices in their homes. This provision directly addressed concerns raised by focus group participants who described being barred from installing basic cooling equipment despite experiencing dangerous indoor heat.

Following this historic victory, the Los Angeles City Council moved to initiate a similar policy process for the city. The next phase of organizing for tenants now centers on securing a comparable right to cooling for tenants in the City of Los Angeles, while also exercising their new rights to install cooling.

Recommendations

Start organizing before legislation is drafted. The Los Angeles campaign benefited from early engagement, beginning when the County first initiated its stakeholder process. Participating from the outset gave tenants opportunities to shape the policy conversation before agency recommendations had solidified. Community organizations should monitor local government agendas and engage as soon as policy development begins. Even more effective, however, is proactively advancing policy ideas to elected officials who are willing to champion them. By helping place an issue on the policy agenda, community organizations can influence the framing and direction of policy from the very beginning, rather than responding to proposals developed by others.

Use participatory research to develop policy demands. Rather than relying solely on expert opinion, SAJE used focus groups to document tenants' experiences and identify policy solutions grounded in lived experience. These findings helped shape advocacy positions and provided evidence that organizers could use in meetings, public testimony, and written comments.

Community-based research can therefore function as both a research method and an organizing strategy.

Center those most affected as spokespeople. Throughout the campaign, tenants—not just organizational staff—communicated directly with policymakers through meetings, public testimony, and written comments. Their firsthand accounts helped frame indoor cooling as a habitability and public health issue rather than simply a technical climate issue. Organizations should create opportunities for impacted residents to lead advocacy whenever possible.

Be prepared to adapt advocacy strategies. Campaigns rarely unfold as expected. When a late amendment threatened to weaken the ordinance, advocates quickly shifted from promoting a cooling-equipment mandate to defending a universal indoor temperature standard. Maintaining flexibility allowed organizers to protect an important policy victory while continuing to pursue broader goals over the longer term.

Build broad coalitions while maintaining community leadership. The ordinance ultimately received support from tenant organizations, environmental justice groups, labor organizations, and climate advocates. Building coalitions expanded political influence, but the campaign remained grounded in the priorities identified by tenants themselves. Coalitions are often most effective when directly impacted communities continue to set the agenda.

Conclusion

This study examined how low-income tenants in Los Angeles experience extreme heat, the barriers they face in accessing cooling, and the policy solutions they believe are necessary to protect health and well-being in a warming climate. Drawing on four focus groups with 58 renters, the findings provide a tenant-centered perspective on a growing public health and housing crisis. While existing research has established the dangers of extreme heat and the importance of air conditioning, this study contributes a deeper understanding of the housing conditions, landlord-tenant dynamics, and everyday survival strategies that shape heat vulnerability among renters.

The findings demonstrate that extreme heat is not merely an environmental issue but a habitability issue. Participants described severe physical and mental health impacts, including headaches, respiratory problems, heat rashes, sleep disruption, stress, and reduced quality of life. Many reported living in buildings that trap heat and remain dangerously warm throughout the night. Although cost was an important barrier to cooling, participants identified additional obstacles that are often overlooked in existing research, including landlord prohibitions on air-conditioning units, inadequate electrical infrastructure, fear of rent increases, fear of retaliation, and housing conditions that make cooling difficult or impossible. Even tenants who possessed portable or window units frequently reported that these systems were insufficient to cool their homes adequately.

The findings also suggest that the economic burden of extreme heat extends beyond electricity costs. Participants described spending money on transportation, food, recreation, gym memberships, and other activities simply to escape overheated homes. These accounts suggest that the cost of remaining cool without adequate in-home cooling may be substantially greater than is commonly recognized in policy discussions. Future research should examine these indirect costs and compare them to the costs of providing cooling equipment and maintaining safe indoor temperatures in rental housing.

The focus groups further revealed that tenants view access to cooling as a basic necessity rather than a luxury. Participants overwhelmingly supported policies requiring landlords to provide cooling and strongly opposed restrictions on tenants' ability to install air-conditioning units. Their experiences directly informed advocacy efforts that contributed to Los Angeles County's adoption of both a right-to-cooling provision and an indoor temperature standard. At the same time, participants expressed concerns that the adopted 82°F threshold may not adequately reflect safe or livable indoor conditions, suggesting a need for future research examining how indoor temperature thresholds correspond to occupant comfort, health outcomes, and perceptions of habitability.

Several limitations warrant future investigation. Additional research should incorporate direct indoor temperature monitoring, larger and more geographically diverse tenant samples, and economic analyses comparing the costs of cooling interventions with the health and financial costs of heat exposure. Further work should also evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of newly adopted cooling ordinances and examine whether temperature-based standards alone are sufficient to protect tenants during increasingly frequent and severe heat events.

As climate change accelerates, the question facing policymakers is no longer whether renters need protection from extreme heat, but how those protections should be delivered. The experiences documented in this study suggest that effective responses must move beyond viewing cooling as an individual responsibility and instead recognize access to safe indoor temperatures as a fundamental component of habitable housing.

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