

Heatwaves threaten Australians' health, and our politicians aren't doing enough about it

November 29 2018, by Paul Beggs, Helen Louise Berry, Martina Linnenluecke And Ying Zhang



In most states where temperatures are increasing, Australians are at a higher risk of suicide. Credit: Ellen Smith

Extreme heat affects the [mental health of Australians](#) to the same degree

as unemployment, yet Australia's policy action on climate change lags behind other high-income countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom.

As Australia approaches another summer, we face the inevitability of deadly heatwaves. Our report published today in the *Medical Journal of Australia* concludes that policy inaction, particularly at the federal level, is putting Australian lives at risk.

The report, [The MJA–Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: Australian policy inaction threatens lives](#), builds on an earlier publication in *The Lancet* medical journal, which concluded [climate change](#) is the biggest global *health* threat of the 21st century.

Australia is the first to prepare its own country-level report. Developed in partnership with the [Lancet Countdown](#) – which [tracks the global connections](#) between [health](#) and climate change – it adopts the structure and methods of the global assessment but with an Australian focus.

How Australians' health suffers

Australians are already facing climate change-related exposures that come from increasing annual average temperatures, heatwaves and weather-related disasters. Australian deaths during the [2014 Adelaide heatwave](#) and Melbourne's 2016 [thunderstorm asthma event](#) are examples of the risk climate poses to our health.

Our report was produced by a team of 19 experts from 13 universities and research institutes. We aimed to answer what we know about climate change and human health in Australia and how we are responding to this threat, if at all.

To do this, our team examined more than 40 indicators that enable us to

track progress on the broad and complex climate change and human health issue. Health impact indicators included the health effects of temperature change and heatwaves, change in labour capacity, trends in climate-sensitive diseases, lethality of weather-related disasters and food insecurity and malnutrition.

We also developed an indicator for the impacts of climate change on mental health. This involved examining the association between mean annual maximum temperatures and suicide rates for all states and territories over the last ten years.

We found that, in most jurisdictions, the suicide rate increased with increasing maximum temperature. In Australia's changing climate, we urgently need to seek ways to break the link between extreme temperature and suicide.

Across other indicators, we found workers' compensation claims in Adelaide increased by 6.2% [during heatwaves](#), mainly among outdoor male workers and tradespeople over 55 years.

And we found the length of heatwaves increased in 2016 and 2017 in Australia's three largest cities – Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Heatwave length varied from year to year, but between 2000 and 2017, the mean number of [heatwave](#) days increased by more than two days across the country.

Policy action we need

Australia's slow transition to renewables and low-carbon electricity generation is problematic, and not only from a climate change perspective. Our report shows that pollutants from fossil fuel combustion cause thousands of [premature deaths](#) nationwide every year. We argue even one premature death is one too many when there is so

much that we can do to address this.

Australia is one of the world's wealthiest countries with the resources and technical expertise to act on climate change and health. Yet Australia's carbon intensity is the highest among the countries we included in our comparison – Germany, United States, China, India and Brazil.

A carbon-intensive energy system is one of the main drivers behind climate change. Australia was once a leader in the uptake of renewables but other nations have since streaked ahead and are reaping the benefits for their economies, energy security and health.

Despite some progress increasing renewable generation, it's time we truly pull our weight in the global effort to prevent acceleration towards dangerous climate change.

Policy leaders must take steps to protect [human health](#) and lives. These include strong political and financial commitments to accelerate transition to renewables and low-carbon electricity generation. The government lacks detailed planning for a clean future with a secure energy supply.

Our *MJA-Lancet* Countdown [report](#) will be updated annually. Now that Australia has begun systematically tracking the effects of [climate](#) change on health – and given its poor performance compared with comparable economies globally – further inaction would be reckless.

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