

Deaths of 3 women in early heat wave raise questions, fears

May 29 2022, by Don Babwin



Veldarin Jackson, Sr., center, talks about receiving the call that his mother, Janice Reed, had died as his wife Adjoa Jackson, left, becomes emotional, Tuesday, May 24, 2022, in Chicago. Reed was one of the three senior victims who died in a Rogers Park building where residents complained of heat. The Cook County Medical Examiner's office has yet to determine the causes of death for the three women on May 14. Credit: Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune via AP

Temperatures barely climbed into the 90s and only for a couple of days. But the discovery of the bodies of three women inside a Chicago senior housing facility this month left the city looking for answers to questions that were supposed to be addressed after a longer and hotter heat wave killed more than 700 people nearly three decades ago.

Now, the city—and the country—is facing the reality that [because of climate change, deadly heat waves](#) can strike just about anywhere, don't only fall in the height of summer and need not last long.

"Hotter and more dangerous heat waves are coming earlier, in May ... and the other thing is we are getting older and more people are living alone," said Eric Klinenberg, a New York University sociologist, who wrote "Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago." about the 1995 heat wave. "It's a formula for disaster."

The Cook County Medical Examiner's office has yet to determine the causes of [death](#) for the three women whose bodies were found in the James Sneider Apartments on May 14. But the victims' families have already filed or plan to file wrongful death lawsuits against the companies that own and manage the buildings.

The City Council member whose ward includes the neighborhood where the building is located said she experienced stifling temperatures in the complex when she visited, including in one unit where heat sensors hit 102 degrees.

"These are senior residents, residents with [health conditions](#) (and) they should not be in these conditions," Alderman Maria Hadden said in a Facebook video shot outside the apartments.

Part of the problem, experts say, is that communities nationwide are still learning how deadly heat can be. It took the sight of refrigerated trucks

being filled with dead bodies after Chicago's 1995 [heat wave](#) to drive home the message that the city was woefully unprepared for a silent and invisible disaster that took more than twice as many lives as the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.



A monitor displays an image of Veldarin Jackson, Sr. and his mother, Janice Reed, who was one of the three senior victims who died in a Rogers Park building where residents complained of heat, at the office of attorney Larry R. Rogers, Jr., Tuesday, May 24, 2022, in Chicago. The Cook County Medical Examiner's office has yet to determine the causes of death for the three women whose bodies were found in the James Snider Apartments on May 14. Credit: Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune via AP

That realization [led to a system in which city workers](#) call the elderly and frail and turn city buildings into 24-hour cooling centers when temperatures become oppressive.

What happened this month is a reminder that the safeguards in place to make sure people don't freeze to death because they have not paid their heating bills often do not exist to prevent people from overheating in their homes.

"We have nothing for [air conditioning](#)," Hadden said.

One expert isn't surprised.

"We recognize people need heating in cold weather and set up programs, financial assistance, to enable that but we don't do that for cooling," said Gregory Wellenius, a Boston University professor of environmental health who has studied heat-related deaths. "But subsidies for cooling are really controversial (because) for many people cooling is seen as a luxury item."

In Chicago, Hadden said the building's management company believed it was not allowed to turn off the heat and turn on the air conditioning until June 1, because of the [city's](#) heat ordinance. But while she said the ordinance has no such requirement, the explanation may at least be a signal that the ordinance should be amended to better protect [vulnerable people](#) from heat.

Wellenius said statistics show that while well over 80% of homes in cities such as Dallas and Phoenix have air conditioning, the percentage is far lower in cities like Boston and New York.



Veldarin Jackson, Sr., left, talks about his deceased mother, Janice Reed, Tuesday, May 24, 2022, in Chicago. Reed was one of the three senior victims who died in a Rogers Park building where residents complained of heat. The Cook County Medical Examiner's office has yet to determine the causes of death for the three women on May 14. Credit: Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune via AP

And in the Pacific Northwest, the percentage is even lower, something that came into stark relief in Oregon, Washington and western Canada last June, when temperatures climbed as high as 118 degrees Fahrenheit, killing 600 people or more.

There is encouraging news.

"More people have air conditioning and we are more aware of the health

risks of heat waves," Klinenberg said.

Still, there is evidence that people don't appreciate or even know just how dangerous the heat can be.

In a study published in 2020, Wellenius and other researchers estimated that nationwide about 5,600 deaths a year could be attributed to [high heat](#)—eight times more than the 700 heat-related deaths that the study found were officially reported each year.

Wellenius said the reasons for what he called a "gross miscalculation" begin with the fact that official statistics only count death certificates that list heat as the sole cause of death. In some cases, heat is not listed as a cause even though it may have led to death in people with other conditions.

He said the same thing happened in the earliest days of the coronavirus pandemic when people who died in nursing homes in Europe "were not tested for COVID so they were not counted as COVID deaths."



The James Sneider Apartments in Rogers Park on Monday, May 16, 2022, in Chicago, where three seniors citizens were discovered dead after residents reported high temperatures. The discovery of the victim's bodies after a brief heat wave this month has raised questions about whether Chicago and the country are ready for the kind of brutal heat wave that killed more than 700 people in the city three decades ago. The Cook County Medical Examiner's office has yet to determine the causes of death for the three women. Credit: Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune via AP

In Cook County, which includes Chicago, the medical examiner's office reported two [heat-related deaths](#) last year, and seven the year before.

Just how many deaths in the U.S. are heat related today is unclear. Wellenius' study, published in 2020, is the result of research from 1997

to 2006. And Klinenberg said the issue has been complicated by the pandemic because the people at greatest risk of being killed by COVID-19 are also at the greatest risk of being killed by extreme heat.

"It's hard to distinguish excess heat deaths from COVID deaths," he said.

Still, Hadden knows something must be done to deal with [heat](#) that can hit earlier and later in the year than it once did.

"We have to plan for this," she said.

Klinenberg wonders if cities will follow up on such talk.

"Heat never feels like the most important thing in cities and by the time it feels like the most important thing it is too late to do anything about it," he said.

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