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This Is New York City's Coronavirus Heatwave

Plan

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by Jaime Madrigano

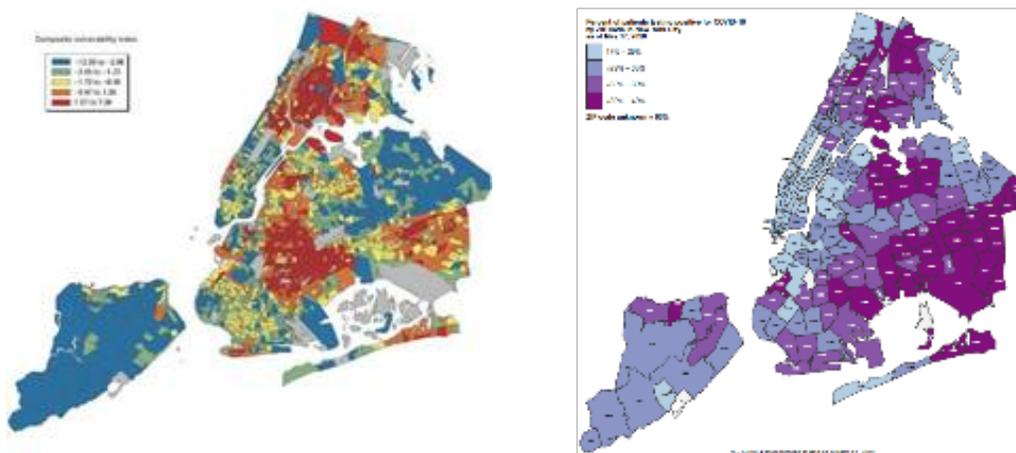
New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has announced a new coronavirus heatwave plan—which is welcome news not only because it will protect the lives of New Yorkers this summer, but also for what it can teach us about long-term heat and, for that matter, climate preparedness.

While the occurrence of a heatwave during the coronavirus pandemic may be the clearest example of an overlapping disaster in the near-term, we will likely see more and more overlapping disasters in the future brought about by a changing climate. These types of events can result in a greater impact than just the sum of their individual effects, as was the case in the prolonged heatwave that occurred in Moscow in 2010, which triggered numerous wildfires and resulted in over ten thousand deaths. And fixes won't be easy; they'll have to be adaptive

and address myriad issues.

Take New York City's plan for heat. Heat is deadly. A recent study suggests more than five thousand deaths related to heat occur in the United States each year. And heat is not an equal opportunity killer. In a study conducted with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, results showed that black New Yorkers are more likely to die during a heatwave than any other group. The characteristics of a neighborhood also matter. More blacktops versus green space means that more heat is retained in a locale, as darker surfaces trap radiation whereas lighter surfaces better reflect solar energy.

In the maps below, high heat vulnerability (red) mirrors high coronavirus infection rates (dark purple) in certain neighborhoods, making protective measures all the more urgent this summer.



These maps point to a general pattern of racial and economic health disparities, common to many cities. It's not too hard to imagine that other city maps will look the same, with disastrous effects for certain populations. Which is why it's worth further examining New York's heat plan.

New York City's coronavirus heatwave plan calls for supplementing traditional public cooling centers with additional facilities. It will also provide vulnerable residents with home air conditioners and the possibility for additional funds to help pay utility bills to run those units. Thinking about these new measures can help us envision a more proactive heat preparedness strategy for the future.

Even in the absence of a pandemic, there are signs that some of the most widespread heat interventions may not reach populations who need them most. Take the example of cooling centers—in theory, they are a low-cost means to provide cooling to those who cannot keep cool at home. They might even nurture community integration and bolster social networks and solidarity. But in practice, there are a number of barriers to the use of cooling centers, including access and transportation issues, limited operational hours, fear of authorities within immigrant communities, and a general reluctance to leave home

and spend time with strangers—concerns that are only heightened during the current pandemic.

The end result is that some of the most vulnerable populations—those with limited means, mobility, and resources—will continue to die.

Locations with similar complexities should consider how to increase opportunities for public cooling over the long term. This might mean reimagining this function to create a network of ad-hoc providers (like small businesses—those known for reinvesting and employing locally)—to provide decentralized “cool-down” spaces. Through public-private partnerships, retail businesses with sufficient space could maximize the number of trusted cooling spots available while receiving subsidies for their public service. This kind of innovative thinking is needed but it won't completely fill the gaps.

For many Americans, access to home air conditioning is essential to stay safe during a heatwave, and the need to isolate has made this even more apparent. Thus, equity needs to be a consideration in the availability of this resource. Going forward, Home Energy Assistance Programs should optimally balance heating and cooling assistance. The concern for any resulting increase in energy use can and should be met by changing social norms around cooling commercial buildings, promoting energy efficiency, and scaling the development of

residential cooling with lower climate impacts. We shouldn't have to choose between a life-sustaining planet and sustaining human life.

Reducing heat vulnerability is also about urban planning and design. We know that historically discriminatory policies have led to communities of color living in hotter neighborhoods, with fewer trees, parks, and other green spaces than other areas. Looking ahead, outdoor spaces should be redesigned with continuous tree canopy and green infrastructure targeted to heat-vulnerable neighborhoods. These open spaces can encourage social cohesion while allowing for physical distance.

But these kinds of changes can result in unintended consequences. As more households transition to alternative energy, lower-income households remaining on the grid could face higher electric bills. Urban design improvements have already resulted in "green gentrification." This could compound the affordable housing crisis and worsen overcrowding, one of the factors now associated with disease spread. Policymakers need to partner with frontline communities to prevent displacement, retain and grow job opportunities, and ensure that lifelong residents can enjoy the benefits of neighborhood improvements.

More clearly than any other event of our time, this crisis has

demonstrated that the health of each and every one of us depends on our neighbor's wellbeing. And that interdependence means plans and strategies that consider the overlap of disasters, are adaptive to changing conditions, and proactively address the social realities in which policies are being implemented. When we approach preparedness holistically and with

engagement across disciplines, geographies, and cultural and socioeconomic strata, we can create more robust and effective plans, particularly for those who we know will be hit the hardest.

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Image: Reuters

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