Too Hot to Think Small

The Case for a Right to Cool in British Columbia

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Centre for Climate Justice

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June 2025

Suggested citation: Yoon, L., Arefin, M.R., Jewell, K., & Pratt, G. (2025). Too Hot to Think Small: The Case for a Right to Cool in British Columbia. University of British Columbia (UBC) Centre for Climate Justice. https://climatejustice.ubc.ca/projects-and-partnerships/too-hot-to-think-small-the-case-for-a-right-to-cool-in-british-columbia/

The Centre for Climate Justice (CCJ) at the University of British Columbia advances the urgent social, political, and economic changes necessary to address the climate crisis. As a Centre operating on unceded ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), and Syilx Okanagan Nation and their peoples, this work takes place in the spirit of repair and transformation. That includes an ongoing attempt to repair the damage done to our collective knowledge by the systemic exclusion of Indigenous, Black and non-European experts and knowledge holders, often created by extractive, unaccountable research practices in frontline communities.

Acknowledgement

The research that informs this report took place on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and səlilwətaɬ Nations, as well as the Semiahmoo, q̓i¢əy̓, kʷikʷəƛ̓ əm, Q’ʷa:ṅ ƛ’ən̓, Qayqayt and sc̓əwaθən məsteyəxʷ First Nations and the Syilx Okanagan Nation. We are grateful to the participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and reflections, which form the core of this work.

We deeply appreciate the insights and review provided by Rowan Burdge of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition and Beverley Pitman of United Way BC.

Our thanks go to Sam Bradd, Olive Dempsey, and Katie McChesney for their support for the Knowledge Exchange event of May 2024 that informs this report.

We are grateful to Katie McChesney, Shannon Daub, Samyukta Srinivasan, Leslie Kennah and the UBC Centre for Climate Justice for their support of this report and its launch.

This work was made possible through the collaboration with community partners on various research projects that informs this report: Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture, BC Schizophrenia Society, South Vancouver Neighbourhood House, South Vancouver Seniors Network, Elizabeth Fry Society, Engaged Communities Canada Society, and Yarrow Intergenerational Society for Justice.

Funding support for some of the research was provided by the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR)’s Catalyst Grant: Transforming Public Health: Supporting Research on Priorities Outlined in Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO) Report (202303FO4 189642), and Health Canada’s Climate Change and Health Office (Contract # 4500459413).

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Design and cover photo by: *Mahin E Alam*

Executive Summary

In the wake of the 2021 heat dome, the deadliest environmental disaster in Canadian history, the urgency for bold, systemic action on heat has never been greater. While policies that mark important steps forward are starting to emerge, they remain largely inaccessible to those who need them most. Living well in a warming province will require enforceable protections that account for power imbalances and deep-rooted inequities.

We need transformative change, not piecemeal solutions.

Here we propose a holistic Right to Cool framework: a collective, rights-based vision that integrates sociological, biomedical, and technological approaches to promote equitable experiences of heat in our warming province. We argue that incremental, siloed solutions for heat are not enough to address the structural inequalities that leave the most marginalized even more vulnerable. Grounded in the lived experiences of British Columbians, we offer specific policy recommendations while urging municipalities and the province to move beyond fragmented fixes toward comprehensive climate action.

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Introduction

Too Hot to Think Small

In 2021, an unprecedented heat dome transformed British Columbia (BC) into a global frontline of the climate crisis. On June 29 of that year, the Village of Lytton recorded the highest outdoor temperature in national history. The next day, wildfires left Lytton in ruins. In the end, at least 619 people in BC died, making it the deadliest environmental disaster in Canadian history. **Astoundingly, 98% of those who perished died indoors, in spaces that were supposed to serve as refuges: their homes. Most were older, poor, lived alone, and lacked social connections, highlighting the unequal burden shouldered by marginalized communities during that decidedly deadly time.**

While 2021 was a period of extremes for BC, heat continues to injure and kill. This is not normal, nor is it inevitable. If we let it, heat has the capacity to transform our relationships not only to our built and natural environments but also to each other. Heat forces the question: how are we going to survive and care for each other in a province wracked with housing and climate crises? How will we respond when threats like heat push our existing systems of care to their breaking points, leaving some protected and others in danger?

We argue that mitigating the impacts of heat requires a robust Right to Cool framework: an expansive, unifying, and enforceable vision that positions cooling as a fundamental right. In many ways, this is not a new idea. Since 2021, advocates, communities, researchers and politicians have proposed—in different forms – a rights-based approach to addressing heat in BC. In 2024, the City of Vancouver even adopted a motion citing the "right to cool," highlighting the city's interest in a rights-based approach to cooling.[1]

Though conceptually rooted in a rights-based approach, the City's 2024 motion stopped short of calling for the transformative scope suggested by what we define as a Right to Cool framework. The main problem? Its narrow language focused almost exclusively on obstacles related to mechanical cooling in the Strata Property Act. Don't get us wrong – such changes are timely, necessary, and even likely to reduce heat-related injury and death. However, the motion's focus on strata bylaws is a prime example of a targeted policy change that fails to protect many of those who need it most. And it's not the only example. Many similarly targeted efforts have been proposed and are in the process of being implemented. These include BC Hydro's free

1 Dominato, L. & Meiszner, P. (2024). Council Members' Motion Advocating for Climate-Resilient Housing Standards in Response to Extreme Heat Events. https://council.vancouver.ca/20241127/documents/pspcmotion1.pdf.

Image courtesy of Anastasiaya/Unsplash

air conditioner programs, expanded access to public cooling centres, BC Heat Alert & Response System (HARS), and changes to building codes requiring cooling in new buildings. These are all necessary policies that have a vital role to play in our rapidly warming world. But outside of a robust Right to Cool framework, they remain underpowered and piecemeal; left siloed, well-intentioned policies are fated to remain ineffective. At their worst, siloed heat policies thwart real change by granting moral license under the assumption that 'we've done what we can' when we all know 'we need to do better'.

So, what is the Right to Cool? The way we see it, the Right to Cool acknowledges that heat, both chronic and extreme, is reconfiguring our social worlds and environments in complex ways. Rather than rooting down into the technical tools of targeted policy fixes, it understands that we should take this moment to envision something new that is comprehensive and fundamentally better. The Right to Cool is a vision not only interested in enduring climate change and reducing the number of casualties. Instead, it is a broad, inclusive vision of collective care that leaves no one behind, one in which surviving climate disasters is not dictated by how much money someone has or where they happen to live.

The stakes are high and the task is urgent. If we're not careful, existing patterns will lead to a future where only those able to rent and buy climate-adapted housing will stay cool. If we don't act, the fault lines of social inequities will be felt more and more viscerally.

In this report, we lay out a vision for the Right to Cool at the de-siloed intersection of technology, **housing, and health and wellbeing**. First, we review the dominant assumptions and discuss examples of interventions stemming from each sphere. Through stories of BC residents, we then demonstrate the limitations of those interventions. Finally, we outline the Right to Cool framework and end with recommendations for municipal and provincial policy. These recommendations, and this report as a whole, have been co-crafted with community partners on the front lines of housing, climate, aging, and poverty reduction work. ●

Current Landscape of Cooling and Its Limitations

Where We Are

1. "What We Need Is Targeted, Technological Innovation"

In November 2024, the City of Vancouver passed a motion to urge the provincial government to 1) amend the City Charter to grant the City authority to establish maximum safe indoor temperatures for residential buildings; 2) amend the Strata Property Act to ensure residents can install mechanical cooling solutions; and 3) provide grants and subsidies for installation of energy-efficient cooling systems to individual owners. This augments BC Hydro's free portable air conditioner program introduced for lower-income households in 2023. Other proposed solutions include retrofitting buildings or acquiring energy-efficient certifications like LEED.

While these measures help, they are unlikely to impact many of those who need them the most, now. For one thing, setting a single maximum indoor temperature assumes that all bodies respond to heat in the same way.[2] Older adults, people with disabilities, those on certain medications, and other populations physiologically susceptible to heat stress require different temperatures to remain safe[3], and thus a universal threshold is inadequate for protecting those most at risk. Further, focusing on a universal maximum threshold runs the risk of ignoring the cumulative nature of chronic heat exposure, especially for those in occupations like construction and agricultural work.

Time after time we've seen that mechanical cooling is not a perfect solution. A focus on temperature alone ignores the fact that people still die with air conditioning, as shown in Arizona where over 75% of indoor heat-related deaths happened in homes with air conditioning.[4] Often this is because air conditioners are too expensive to operate, or else tenants do not have autonomous control over them. In the context of income inequality, focusing solely on cooling overlooks the broader impacts of energy insecurity, meaning that staying cool often comes at the cost of other essential needs like medication and food.[5]

From a policy perspective, technological interventions like setting a maximum indoor temperature or offering free air conditioners are inadequate if they're not

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[2, 3] Kenny, G. P., Flouris ,Andreas D., Yagouti ,Abderrahmane & and Notley, S. R. (2019). Towards establishing evidence-based guidelines on maximum indoor temperatures during hot weather in temperate continental climates. *Temperature* 6, 11–36.
[4] Snow, A. (2024). Heat deaths of people without air conditioning, often in mobile homes, underscore energy inequity. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/extreme-heat-deaths-air-conditioning-095cc1820abab04ed9729c6de73f21ce
[5] Hernández, D. (2016). Understanding 'energy insecurity' and why it matters to health. *Social Science & Medicine* 167, 1–10.

universally accessible and enforceable. Retrofitting and energy-efficient upgrades prioritize homeowners and landlords, leaving renters and lower-income communities behind. Heat pumps and LEED-certified buildings may reduce emissions, but they do little to ensure that cooling is accessible to those who urgently need it most.

One story that illustrates the limits of technological innovation and targeted policy is Melissa's. A senior living in Vancouver, Melissa uses a wheelchair and lives alone. While many of the tenants we spoke with did not have air conditioning, Melissa was an exception. She had air conditioning in one room – her bedroom – which could maintain a cool enough temperature. This meant that while her unit technically met the recently introduced standard for new builds in Vancouver[6], the lived experience of that standard was grim. Melissa described the heat dome as:

> **"It was just too hot. When we had the really bad weather in 2021 in the heat that summer and in last summer. We lived in the bedroom, the three cats and I."**

For days on end, Melissa found herself trapped in her bedroom unable to reside comfortably in the rest of her apartment due to the unliveable temperatures. As someone with already limited mobility, Melissa was further isolated by the heat even though on paper she had what the City of Vancouver has deemed liveable.

Melissa's experience is indicative of the limitations of targeted, technological solutions that propose one-size-fits-all approaches. While well-intended, solutions like these can obscure the complexities of real life, disproportionately lived by those on the margins.

2. "The Housing Crisis and the Right to Cool Are Two Separate Issues"

Unhoused people are exposed to harsh weather throughout the year, which heightens their risk to climate-related injury and harm. The right of unhoused people to live with integrity must be integrated within any Right to Cool framework. City greening, public cooling centres, accessible and clean water and restrooms, and safe shelter for all who want it will play a vital role in keeping our communities safe. At the same time, being housed does not guarantee protection. This is especially true in BC, where 98% of the people who died in the 2021 heat dome died indoors.

Both extreme and chronic indoor heat is disproportionately felt by elderly, disabled, migrant, poor, Indigenous, and racialized people.[7] This fact is doubly true if those people are also renters. Tenants make up approximately one-third of BC households and account for over half of Vancouver's households.[8] BC has the highest rate of evictions in Canada and BC renters are 30% more likely than the national average to be evicted through no-fault evictions.[9] Coupled with a crumbling and unaffordable housing stock, this means BC renters often choose between quality, safety and affordability. The converging housing and climate crises require a coordinated response at all levels of government, not isolated and conditional programs like the 2023 BC Hydro initiative to provide free air conditioners to low-income tenants. While noble in intent, the BC Hydro program has proven itself emblematic of piecemeal programs that remain

[6] British Columbia Building and Safety Standards Branch. (2024). Protection from Overheating in Dwelling Units. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/construction-industry/building-codes-and-standards/bulletins/2024-code/b24-08_overheating.pdf.
[7] Health Canada. (2022). Health of Canadians in a Changing Climate: Advancing Our Knowledge for Action. https://changingclimate.ca/site/assets/uploads/sites/5/2021/10/0-OVERVIEW-EN.pdf.
[8] British Columbia Office of the Premier. (2023). New fund will protect thousands of renters in B.C. *BC Gov News* https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2023PREM0002-000023.
[9] Xuereb, S. & Jones, C. (2023). Estimating No-Fault Evictions in Canada: Understanding BC's Disproportionate Eviction Rate in the 2021 Canadian Housing Survey. Balanced Supply of Housing. https://bsh.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Estimating-No-Fault-Evictions-in-Canada.pdf

Image courtesy of Mahin E Alam

ineffective.[10] One key issue was that the program required landlord approval, something that posed an obstacle to accessing the program.[11] Such conditions prioritize the property rights of landlords over their obligations to basic standards of maintenance, effectively denying the tenant's Right to Cool.

Here we offer two examples of tenants rendered especially vulnerable to extreme heat because of crumbling and unaffordable housing stock and precarious labour conditions. Both were unable to request upgrades from their landlord as a direct result of unjust housing and labour realities. In one example, Robert, a low-income renter, describes the effects of extreme heat on his home:

> **"The heat has melted all the plastic finishes on the south side of the building. The V-seal that seals the air between the two sliding glass panes when the sliding doors close got all really crispy and dry and when we had those windstorms in the fall [of 2021, the seal] blew right off. Now when it's really cold in the winter, the cold just pours in. The ceiling level and our chest level: it's really warm. But our feet are still freezing. So, we have to have a fan on just to circulate the air. The extreme heat and then the extreme cold: it just ravaged our exterior."**

Robert lives in New Westminster, which recently passed a bylaw to prevent renovictions.[12] An unintended consequence we've found is that landlords are divesting from maintenance altogether. As a case in point, Robert's landlord recently told him that because of this bylaw, "they're not going to put a penny into

[10] Uguen-Csenge, E. (2023). Landlords in B.C. warning renters against installing AC units despite rising heat. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-air-conditioner-renters-1.6906665

[11] Yumagulova, L., Okamoto, T., Crawford, E. & Klein, K. (2022). Lived Experience of Extreme Heat in B.C. Government of B.C. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/climate-change/adaptation/resources/lived_experience_of_extreme_heat_in_bc_final_report.pdf

[12] City of New Westminster. (n.d.) Renovictions, Tenant Protection and Resources. https://www.newwestcity.ca/housing/renovictions-tenant-protection-and-resources.

Image courtesy of Elise Hjalmarson

maintenance anymore." Robert told us he is painfully aware that his rent of $700 a month would climb to $2500 if his unit were repaired and rented to a new tenant. And so, for now, Robert keeps quiet; the end result is unsafe living conditions for someone who can't afford to rent at current market prices.

For migrant agricultural workers in the Okanagan, a reluctance to protest extreme indoor temperatures comes from another source. Our research tracks temperatures in the employer-provided rental housing of seasonal agricultural workers. During the hottest summer months, indoor temperatures of workers' housing consistently exceed outdoor temperatures, as well as standards set by the BC Agricultural Council and Western Agriculture Labour Initiative.[13] Workers thus endure excessively and unrelentingly hot conditions at work and then again at home. Inadequate regulation and enforcement of housing standards, and the profound vulnerability of workers on temporary visas, mean workers are denied basic mitigative measures related to the Right to Cool, and are also denied the job security to demand them. As a representative of the migrant justice collective, Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture (RAMA), notes:

"That's something we talk about very often. The biggest fear is that if they're seen as a problematic worker, meaning somebody who's asking for things, they're just not going to be asked to come back. When you're part of the program between Canada and Mexico as part of the SAWP [Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program] that can mean two things: you're blacklisted from the program or you go back into a list and then you're distributed wherever the Mexican government distributes you."

[13] Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture (RAMA) & UBC Centre for Climate Justice. (2024). Migrant Agricultural Workers in BC Face Compounding Crises: Housing and Climate. UBC Centre for Climate Justice https://climatejustice.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2024/08/FINAL-RAMA-Report.pdf.

If the right to cooling exists alongside structural conditions that disempower tenants and workers – and privileges the rights of landlords and employers – that right is rendered null and void. For this and other reasons, ensuring human rights and countering housing and labour precarity are vital to the Right to Cool.[14]

3. "Physiological Wellbeing Is the Primary Indicator of Heat-Related Risk"

Health authorities, in collaboration with municipalities, play a crucial role in heat mitigation by implementing services like public cooling in community spaces. Public health initiatives such as these often focus on populations most physiologically susceptible to heat-related illness and death, such as seniors. In many cases, this is warranted because older people living with co-morbidities die at disproportionately high rates during heat waves, and comprised over 67% of the 2021 heat dome deaths.

While the term 'vulnerable populations' includes many groups of people like seniors who deserve targeted care, it overlooks many others. Whenever there is a tendency to define vulnerability solely along biomedical lines, we run the risk of neglecting the diverse and overlapping factors that create vulnerability in the first place. We need solutions that prioritize those with physiological vulnerabilities while also considering social and economic factors so that we may avoid accidently excluding other at-risk communities. This is crucial for many reasons, high among them that health researchers determined a "combined index of material and social deprivation"[15] was most predictive of death during the 2021 heat dome.

Focusing on biomedically vulnerable populations can be indicative of a downstream drift in public health research – a trend that sidelines systemic and structural causes of inequity in favour of focusing on individual health-related interventions.[16] Again, this is not to say that focusing on biomedically vulnerable populations is unwarranted when it comes to cooling. **However, a broader Right to Cool vision demands we re-evaluate vulnerability as not merely an individual shortcoming or a physical ailment, but a dynamic process influenced by many different factors.** The Right to Cool pushes us to move beyond assuming bodies are solely biomedical entities toward recognizing them as complex beings – embedded within environments, histories, and structural conditions that shape their experiences of heat and access to cooling.

One participant from our research – a racialized refugee and single mother who speaks limited English – illustrates how cooling centres are a necessary yet limited effort in the context of broader social inequities. When we asked how she accesses the closest cooling (and warming) centre near her, she answered:

> **"That's another problem. [The] community centre is 25 minutes [away]. But imagine when it's raining, plus heat… This can be so hard and I, again, I can't afford all the [bus] tickets for that because all I have, I [use] for my kids. I can't afford [them] for three people in the house. So I walked the whole time... 25 minutes going there and then [25 minutes] coming back again."**

[14] Migrants' Intersecting Experiences with Housing in Agriculture (MIHA). (2025). National Housing Standards for Migrant Agricultural Workers. Farmworker Housing. https://farmworkerhousing.ca/national-housing-standards/.
[15] Henderson, S. B., McLean, K. E., Lee, M. J. & Kosatsky, T. (2022). Analysis of community deaths during the catastrophic 2021 heat dome. *Environ Epidemiol* 6, e189.
[16] McLaren, L., Masuda, J., Smylie, J. & Zarowsky, C. (2020). Unpacking vulnerability: towards language that advances understanding and resolution of social inequities in public health. *Can J Public Health* 111, 1–3.

The fact that multiple axes of inequality impact vulnerability in the face of heat was also evident in interviews with people living with schizophrenia.[17] **Astoundingly, people with schizophrenia constituted 15.7% of heat-related deaths from the heat dome despite representing only 1% of BC's population.** While existing research around thermoregulation in people with schizophrenia is predominantly biomedical in nature, our interviews revealed that heat vulnerability is a tapestry woven with complex threads of social, environmental and health-related factors. In particular, social isolation is a primary contributing factor to heat-related risk for people with schizophrenia.[18] Due to symptoms such as paranoia and auditory hallucinations that make it difficult for people with schizophrenia to be in public at all, the accessibility of cooling centres is compounded by prejudice and stigma. As one participant put it, "Because out of all the mental illnesses, I think schizophrenia, paranoid schizophrenia, is one with the highest stigma likelihood than anybody else. That's why I'm living in hiding."

Another participant captured what it feels like to live with and within these stigmas by stating bluntly:

> **"People don't care if people with schizophrenia die."[19]**

A holistic Right to Cool framework goes beyond thinking about vulnerability in terms of individualized health and wellbeing alone: it contextualizes and complicates individual health factors within asymmetrical social worlds, and acknowledges that vulnerable populations are, in fact, much more expansive.

[17] Yoon, L,, Tetzlaff, E.J., Wong, C., Chiu, T., Hiscox, L., Mew, S., Choquette, D., Kenny, G.P., & Schütz, C.G. (2024). Responding to the Heat and Planning for the Future: An Interview-Based Inquiry of People with Schizophrenia Who Experienced the 2021 Heat Dome in Canada. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 21, 1108. doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21081108

[18, 19] Yoon L, Tetzlaff EJ, Chiu T, Wong C, Hiscox L, Mew S, Choquette D, Kenny GP, Schütz CG, White R. (2025). Surviving the 2021 Heat Dome with Schizophrenia: A Qualitative, interview-based unpacking of risks and vulnerabilities. *Social Science & Medicine*, 366 (February 2025), 117656. Published online first: doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117656

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Key Recommendations
A Way Forward

The 2021 heat dome and our subsequent research have illustrated that no single policy intervention will adequately address the challenges presented by heat. As such, the Right to Cool must uphold an expansive and comprehensive vision: one that connects heat-related policy to the pressing human rights struggles of our time, namely: housing justice, labour rights, disability justice, poverty eradication, and social equity. Rights-based solutions must work on multiple fronts should we hope to promote systemic change.

Nevertheless, broad visions require specific actions, and we cannot overlook the fact that people are falling ill and dying now. Below are examples of key policy recommendations that reflect the structural realities detailed in this report.

1. Immediate life-saving policy changes to reduce heat-related harms

- **Expand and improve cooling device distribution programs**: The BC government has provided free air conditioners to some, but at a scale far below need. A more ambitious program must be developed. Rather than prioritizing the interests of landlords, these programs should prioritize tenants, seniors, people with disabilities, and those in social housing, ensuring equitable access. Free indoor thermometers would also allow tenants to understand, document, and share unsafe indoor temperatures which can inform grassroots movements for expanded programs and protections.

- **Free public transit during heatwaves:** Investing in free transit for all would mitigate risk by reducing the urban heat island effect through lower vehicle emissions. But in the interim, prioritizing free transit during heat events provides a crucial stopgap measure that we need now. Municipalities must make transit free during heatwaves, similar to cold weather emergency measures, to ensure residents can travel to a climate adapted shelter if it's not available in their home.

2. Transformative interventions – Housing and tenant protections

- **Address housing precarity and quality and prioritize vacancy control:** Heat vulnerability is tied to housing insecurity and indoor environmental quality. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted

Image courtesy of Aditya Chinchure/Unsplash

approach. One needed measure is vacancy control, which ties rents to units rather than individual tenancies. This prevents landlords from issuing large rent increases between tenants and removes what tenant advocates call the incentive to evict.[20] This measure would move towards reducing the precarity and displacement characteristic of BC's rental housing market. Importantly, there already exists a precedent for this: the City of Vancouver has enacted vacancy control on SRO units in the Downtown Eastside,[21] illustrating that amendments like these are politically possible. Diverse organizations, including the BC General Employees' Union (BCGEU), tenant advocacy groups, and community organizations are converging around the idea that stabilizing and reducing rental prices is essential for climate resilience because it reduces precarity.[22] Such a growing coalition underscores a broader recognition that housing justice is central to climate action, as people facing displacement are more susceptible to heat and other climate-related threats. By uniting labour, tenant, and climate justice movements, vacancy control offers a concrete policy solution that disrupts the cycle of financial precarity and environmental risk. Further, introducing rent control and landlord accountability measures and providing more rights to people in encampments will help ensure. the right to cooling within the current housing crisis context.[23]

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[20] Vancouver Tenants Union. (2022). "Renters Plan" to Mark the Launch of Tenant Resistance Movement Against Broadway Plan's Transit-Oriented Displacement. Vancouver Tenants Union https://www.vancouvertenantsunion.ca/rentersplan.
[21] Kulkarni, A. B.C. law change will let City of Vancouver enact SRO vacancy control. *CBC British Columbia* (2024).
[22] BC General Employees' Union (2021). Staying Safe While Working in the Heat. BC General Employees' Union. https://www.bcgeu.ca/staying_safe_while_working_in_the_heat.
[23] The Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2024). Response from the Minister to the Advocate's Report on Homeless Encampments Canadian Human Rights Commission. https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/resources/publications/response-the-minister-the-advocates-report-homeless-encampments.

- **Green social housing initiatives:** In the middle of the 20th century, Canada was a leader in the building of public housing.[24] To meet this moment, we must expand investment in green social housing. This should include robust provincial and federal investments in new non-profit housing and retrofitting older housing stock with energy-efficient cooling systems. Priority should be given to tenants in precarious or inadequate housing situations, including residents of SROs and low-cost rental units. A more equitable distribution of greenspaces for lower income neighbourhoods and other underprivileged areas is an important contribution to this effort and helps to mitigate the disproportionate impact of the urban heat island effect.[25,26]

3. Transformative interventions – Poverty as a central focus and building solidarity across movements.

- **"Too Hot to Work" legislation and paid climate leave:** The intersecting crises of labour precarity and climate change leave many workers unable to demand safe, cool conditions. Migrant agricultural workers in BC endure extreme heat in both their workplaces and in their employer-provided homes. Strengthening workplace protections, enforcing maximum indoor and outdoor work temperatures, and ensuring that employer-provided housing meets climate adaptation standards are necessary first steps in securing thermal security for workers. Paid climate leave during heat-related business closures and enforcing employer accountability for climate-safe working conditions must also be considered.[27]

- **Create (more) unionized, non-extractive green jobs that pay a living wage, and work to close the gap between the minimum wage and living wage:** Climate adaptation must create secure, well-paid jobs, particularly in housing retrofits, healthcare, and public transit – areas which are crucial to building buffers against the changing climate. Expanding unionized, non-extractive employment is crucial for both economic and climate resilience. Further, resisting worker precarity and ensuring workers' rights will support safer working conditions.[28]

4. Data justice – Equitably accounting for different experiences

- **Data justice should be central to the Right to Cool vision because it exposes the hidden layers of vulnerability that standard data collection often misses or misrepresents:** Traditional climate and health monitoring systems often fail to capture the complexity of intersecting risks.[29] For example, the coroner's report on the 2021 Heat dome

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[24] Tranjan, R. (2023). *The Tenant Class*. Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.
[25] Hayes, A. T. et al. Nature-Based Solutions (NBSs) to Mitigate Urban Heat Island (UHI) Effects in Canadian Cities. *Buildings* 12, 925 (2022). *and* Triguero-Mas, M. et al. Exploring green gentrification in 28 Global North cities: the role of urban parks and other types of greenspace. *Environ. Res. Lett.* (2022) doi:10.1088/1748-9326/ac9325.
[26] Luo, D., BCIT School of Health Sciences, E. H. & Heacock, H. Access to green space and median household income in metro Vancouver cities. *BCIT Environmental Public Health Journal* (2020) doi:10.47339/ephj.2020.10. *and* Anguelovski, I. (2016). From Toxic Sites to Parks as (Green) LULUs? New Challenges of Inequity, Privilege, Gentrification, and Exclusion for Urban Environmental Justice. *Journal of Planning Literature* 31, 23–36.
[27] Worker Solidarity Network. (2023). Can't Stand the Heat? Get Out of the Kitchen! The Impact of Extreme Weather Events on Food Service Workers in British Columbia. https://workersolidarity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Climate-and-Labour-Report-WSN-2023.pdf.
[28] BC Poverty Reduction Coalition (BCPRC). (2023). BCPRC submission re: Provincial poverty reduction plan Review, April 2023. BC Poverty Reduction Coalition https://www.bcpovertyreduction.ca/advocacy-and-impact/provincial-poverty-reduction-plan-review.
[29] Stern, R. N. & Arefin, M. R. (2024). Extreme Heat in the Home: Understanding the 2021 Pacific Northwest Heat Wave through the British Columbia Coroners Report. *Journal of Disaster Studies* 1, 103–118. *and* Yoon, L., Richardson, G.R.A., & Gorman, M. (2024). Reflections on a Century of Extreme Heat Event-Related Mortality Reporting in Canada. *GeoHealth*. doi.org/10.1029/2023GH000895

lacked disaggregated data on race, disability, and socioeconomic status – an omission that both obscures the lived realities of marginalized groups and undermines equitable policy responses. To make effective interventions, we need data that allows us to identify who is most at risk, such as housing status, citizenship/migration status, disability, race, and socioeconomic status. Calls for data justice in heat governance are not additional demands; they would align with BC's Anti-Racism Data Act.[30] The passage of Bill C-226, Canada's first environmental justice legislation, also underscores the critical importance of data justice in addressing environmental racism.[31] Both commit to comprehensive data collection and analysis, and illuminate systemic inequities that have long been obscured.[32]

- **We must recognize that neither data nor the process of data collection is neutral; they are shaped by power and embedded within colonial and discriminatory histories:** To be just, data practices must be transparent, inclusive, and guided by those most affected. As recent legislative efforts such as Bill C-226 affirm, meaningful data collection must not only reveal inequities but also be co-developed with communities in ways that respect autonomy, build trust, and enable collective action.[33]

[30] Government of British Columbia. (2022). The Anti-Racism Data Act. https://antiracism.gov.bc.ca/data-act/.
[31] Parliament of Canada. (2024). Private Member's Bill C-226 (44-1) - Royal Assent - National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Act - Parliament of Canada.
[32, 33] Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2022). Guidance on the Use of Standards for Race-Based and Indigenous Identity Data Collection and Health Reporting in Canada. https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/guidance-and-standards-for-race-based-and-indigenous-identity-data-en.pdf.

Image courtesy of Kendra Jewell

Closing

Caring for Each Other in a Warming World

The Right to Cool must not be limited to a series of isolated, 'one-time' policy fixes – it must be a sustained political and social commitment, with accountability measures that are long-term and apply to governments as they change.

A cooling bylaw is ineffective if it is passed and then forgotten or remains unenforced. Free transit, green social housing, and targeted labour protections are critical, but they are insufficient on their own.

The key here is not only to implement these specific recommendations, but to embed them into broader fights for housing justice, economic justice, labour rights, disability rights, and climate justice, at minimum. As evidenced by epidemiological reports following the 2021 heat dome which showed that a combined index of material and social deprivation was the most predictive of heat-related death,[34] concerns for poverty and associated inequities must guide policy design. Poverty eradication is a must in ensuring the Right to Cool, and must be prioritized and enforced.

We recognize and honour the efforts and initiatives already unfolding around climate-related risks. However, policymakers must resist the temptation to pass isolated bylaws and move on. Heat governance requires sustained attention, continuous improvement, and active accountability. With effective and transformative policies in place, we can prevent needless suffering, deaths and harms from extreme heat in the future. Only by embedding the Right to Cool within a broader movement for social justice can we build a future where everyone is not only thermally safe but collectively thriving.

[34] Henderson, S.B., McLean, K.., Lee, M.J., & Kosatsky, T. (2022). Analysis of community deaths during the catastrophic 2021 heat dome: Early evidence to inform the public health response during subsequent events in greater Vancouver, Canada. *Environmental Epidemiology* 6(1):p e189. DOI: 10.1097/EE9.0000000000000189