Blacks in 'Urban Heat Islands' at Greater Risk of Heat Wave Deaths

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Where you live and the color of your skin might place you at much greater risk of heat-related death, according to a new study from the University of California at Berkeley reported by the L.A. Times.

For the study, researchers used satellite images to find "urban heat islands." This phrase describes neighborhoods in U.S. cities with few shade trees and a lot of heat-absorbing surfaces, such as pavement, cement and roofing. These areas can become an extra 5 to 10 degrees warmer during heat waves, putting those who live there at a much greater risk of heat-related illness.

When scientists compared the hottest neighborhoods with data from the 2000 Census, they found that blacks were 52 percent more likely than whites to live in these urban heat islands. What's more, Asians were 32 percent more likely and Latinos 21 percent more likely than whites to live in these locations.

But there's even more bad news: Researchers warn that the heat is expected to get worse in upcoming years because of global warming. That means American minorities will suffer even more from the overall effects of climate change.

Interestingly, the study also found that people who lived in more segregated cities—such as Columbus, Ohio, and Houston, Texas, (the most segregated cities in America)—were more likely to live in these heat-absorbing microclimate neighborhoods, regardless of their race.

"Overall, this pattern of racial segregation appears to increase everyone's risk of living in a heat-prone environment," said Rachel Morello-Frosch, PhD, MPH, a professor of public health and environmental science at UC Berkeley, and a study coauthor, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times. "We need to make sure that any heat mitigation strategies really focus on the most vulnerable communities."

To help reduce heat wave risk, study authors recommended that city planners plant more trees, paint reflective roofs, use less heat-absorbing pavements throughout urban areas and consider racial and ethnic disparities when making decisions to prepare neighborhoods for climate change.

Studies show that air pollution, illegal dumping and power plants are also more likely to occur in

African-American and low-income communities. Click here to read more.

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