RESEARCH PROGRAM:
Climate, environment and health (SG-CEH)

Policy Brief | Project SG-CEH-07

Transdisciplinary project to design a comprehensive early response to heat waves for older adults in the City of Buenos Aires

Country: Argentina
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The challenge

Heat waves are one of the extreme weather events with the greatest impact on health in urban areas. In the City of Buenos Aires, older adults are disproportionately vulnerable to extreme heat, due to housing conditions, unequal access to water and energy, health status, support networks, and territorial inequalities. These risks are exacerbated in vulnerable neighborhoods, where power outages and infrastructure limitations reduce coping capacity, while the effects of heat continue to be underreported in health systems.

What was done

- A total of 634 surveys were conducted, along with 4 focus groups (with older adults and caregivers) and questionnaires administered to response stakeholders.
- Heat maps, maps of older adult density, power outages, and vulnerable neighborhoods were created to identify priority areas for intervention.
- Potential weather shelters were identified and geolocated, particularly in vulnerable neighborhoods, with the support of community health workers.
- Existing public policies were analyzed, and an intersectoral working group was formed to co-create response strategies.
- An early response pilot plan was designed, with differentiated measures for the formal city and vulnerable neighborhoods.

Main findings

- There is a gap between knowledge and practice: although most older adults are aware of preventive measures, many do not implement them adequately (for example, insufficient hydration).
- Older adults in vulnerable neighborhoods report greater negative effects of heat and a greater need for assistance in accessing water and food.
- Neighborhood and community networks are emerging as a key asset for coping with extreme heat.
- The impacts of heat and the capacity to respond are not uniform, which requires strategies tailored to specific regions and living conditions.

The approach

The project adopted a transdisciplinary, rights-based approach, integrating research, older adults' knowledge, and local government capabilities. Co-creating solutions with health system stakeholders, the environmental sector, community organizations, and older adults was prioritized, in order to design a comprehensive response to heat waves that is adapted to the diversity of urban environments.

Impact and application

- Concrete inputs for the design and implementation of local public policies, in coordination with the Interministerial Committee on Climate Change and Health of the City of Buenos Aires.
- Strengthening of the Climate Shelter Network, planning of hydration stations, and distribution of safe water.
- Support for the city's integration into the surveillance system for health effects of extreme temperatures, through Sentinel Units.
- A basis for an early response that can be replicated in other Latin American cities with similar urban contexts.

Key lessons

- Heat waves must be addressed as a priority urban public health issue.
- Effective planning requires spatial data, community participation, and cross-sectoral coordination.
- Older adults are key stakeholders in developing adaptation strategies.
- Responses to extreme heat must be tailored, preventive, and sustained over time, integrating health, the environment, housing, and social development.

Key message

Heat waves have a disproportionate impact on the health of older adults in the City of Buenos Aires. Developing early, localized, and cross-sectoral responses—co-created with the community—can reduce risks, save lives, and strengthen urban adaptation to climate change with a focus on equity.

Publication

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