



SWELTERING
CITIES 

Cool Safe Spaces Report

2023



What is a cool safe space?

A cool safe space is a location or facility that provides a comfortable environment or health support for people to escape extreme heat during a heatwave. They may also be known as 'heat shelters'.

Informal cool safe spaces may include air conditioned buildings such as shopping centres, community centres, libraries, and gyms. Formal cool safe spaces may function like emergency relief centres and be designated as local safe locations in heatwaves. They have mechanical cooling like air conditioning and can maintain a safe temperature during heatwaves.

Designated cool safe spaces or heat shelters are used in Australia and elsewhere to help people stay safe during heatwaves. There are a range of different approaches, from extending the opening hours of libraries and pools, to setting up emergency support centres in school halls.

Why are cool safe spaces important?

Cool safe spaces are important because they provide relief from extreme heat and can help prevent heat-related illnesses and deaths. Heatwaves are Australia's deadliest environmental disaster and cause more deaths than all other disasters combined. They affect some of Australia's most marginalised communities, including older Australians, young children, pregnant people, and people with chronic health conditions.

These spaces are critical because not everyone has access to air conditioning or can afford to run it continuously during a heatwave. In addition, some people may live in homes that are not well-insulated or ventilated, making it difficult to escape the heat.

Cool safe spaces should not be relied upon to protect vulnerable populations, but they can be part of a range of solutions that includes making homes safer and health services proactively checking on vulnerable community members. As we've seen from our survey, some of the people who are most vulnerable to heat-related disease are also unable to access cool safe spaces for health or accessibility reasons. Compounding crises such as pandemics, bushfires or floods can make cool safe spaces even less accessible.

"These days, I work from home so it's harder to stay cool during the day and difficult working on hot days (we don't have air conditioning).

Recently, it was so hot I stopped working but couldn't go to the local library or shops because I had COVID. I would definitely get public transport to a cooler place if the public transport was better."

Introduction

In 2023 Sweltering Cities surveyed community members to ask where they go when it gets hot and what they want out of a 'cool safe space' during heatwaves. 262 people responded and many shared their struggles to be comfortable or safe during heatwaves either at home or seeking relief somewhere else. The responses reveal the critical importance of identifying and investing in suitable facilities where people can find respite from extreme heat.

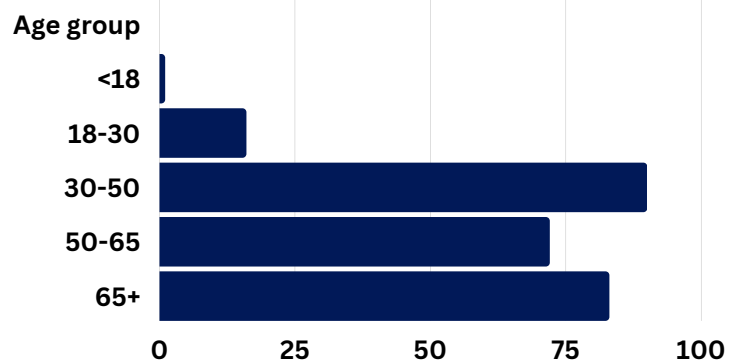
Climate change is causing longer, more frequent and increasingly intense heatwaves. It is important that we collaborate to identify effective solutions to protect communities from the impacts of extreme heat. As well as expanding access to safe, cool spaces, we need to invest in heat-safe homes.

Renters in public, affordable or private housing are more likely to live in low energy efficiency homes with no insulation or air conditioning. They are facing extreme temperatures with limited power to improve their home thermal comfort. The Sweltering Cities 2022 Summer Survey found that 50% of renters were leaving their homes to go to cool safe spaces on hot days, compared to 15% of home owners.

The responses to our survey reveal how difficult it can be to access safe, cool spaces, and the drastic measures that people are taking to keep cool in the heat. We've included quotes from the survey in boxes throughout this report.

Demographics

We gathered responses from people subscribed to the Sweltering Cities email list or following one of our social media accounts. Of the respondents, 73% were women, 20% were men, 3% were non-binary and 4% preferred not to answer. The majority of respondents were over 50 and only one was under 18.



27%
of people go to a shopping centre when it's hot

30%
find it difficult to keep cool at home

"I wouldn't go anywhere beyond home. Walking and public transport is just too hot to manage. Going elsewhere only works for people who drive in air con."
-Richmond

Survey results

Where do you go when it gets hot?

Always stays home
48.1%

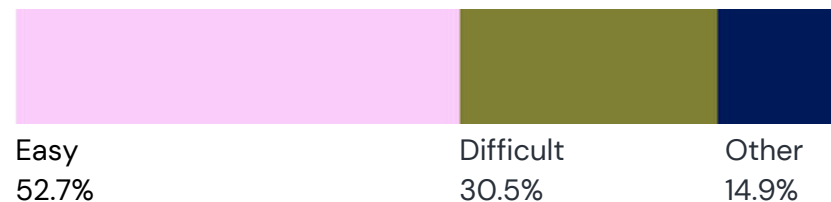
Sometimes stays home
42%



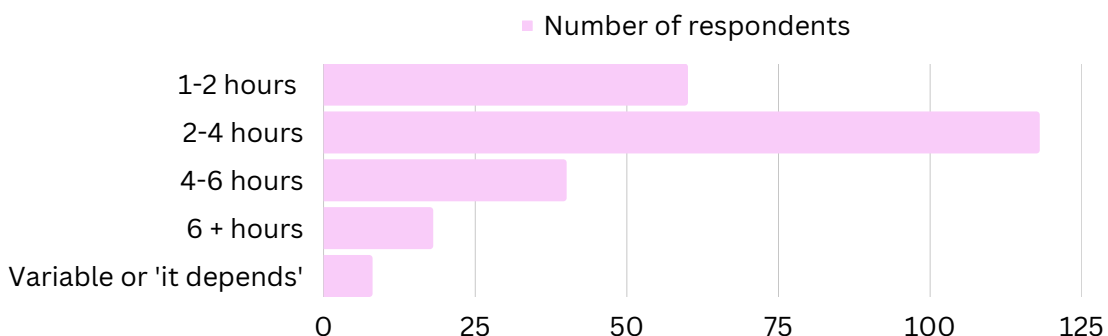
The most popular locations were shopping centres, pools and libraries.



How easy is it for you to keep cool at home?



If you go somewhere cool, how long do you stay?

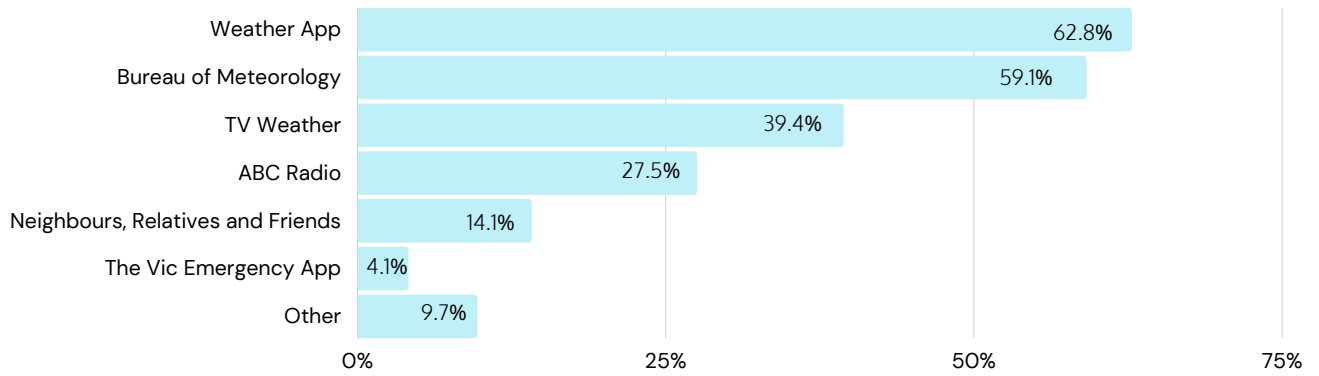


"Finding a cool place is a problem for me as the intense heat exacerbates chronic autoimmune condition. I feel too ill to go anywhere. Shopping malls are a horrid alternative to hot home. No where else to go."

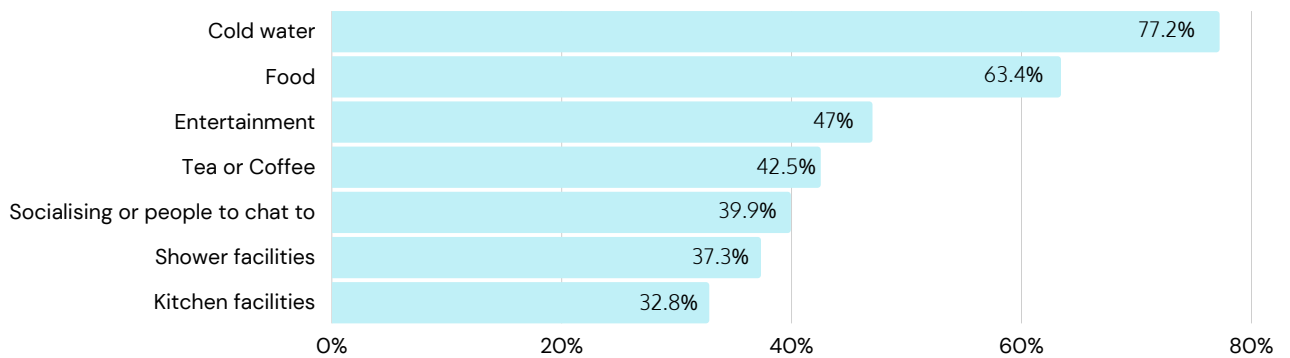
-Paddington

For all of these questions respondents could tick all options that applied to them

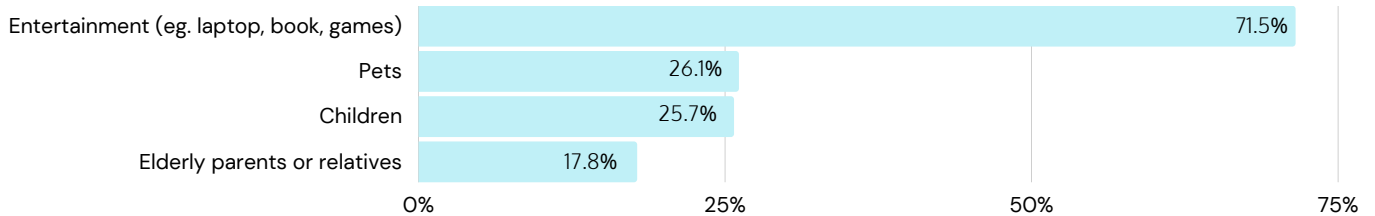
How do you hear about the weather?



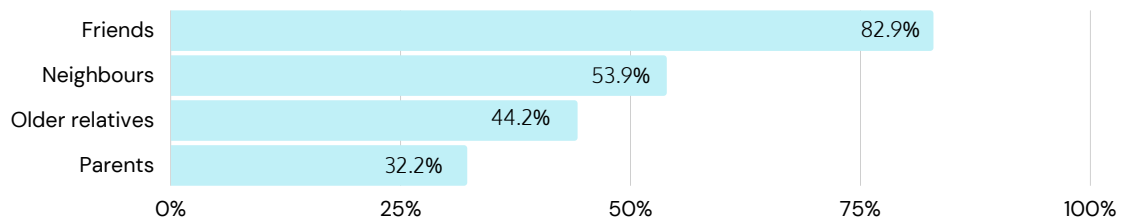
If you were thinking of a good place to go keep cool during a heatwave, what would you like to have there?



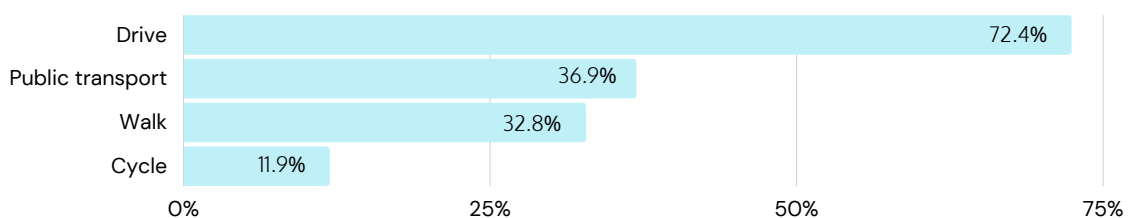
What or who would you bring with you?



If you knew of a cool space available, who would you tell?



If you knew of a cool space available, how would you get there?



Spotlight on Public Housing

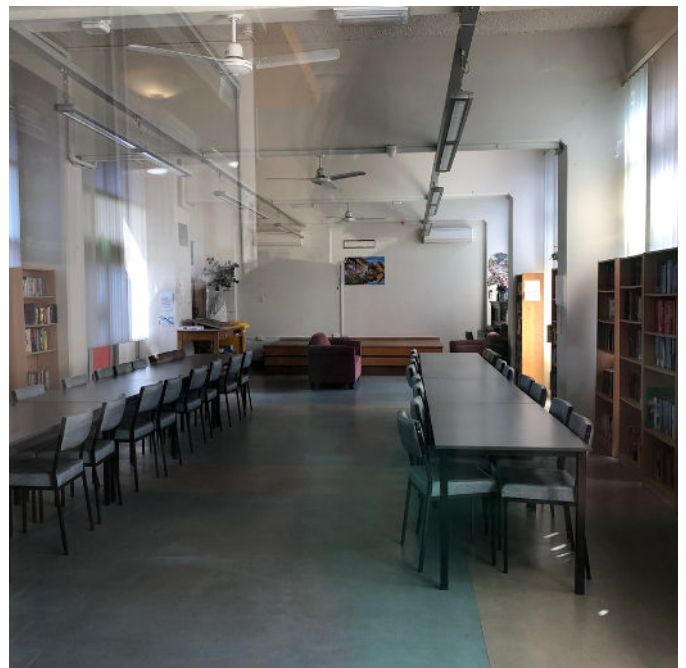
Many of the people across Australia who are living in public housing live in low energy efficiency homes that are hot in summer and cold in winter. They have limited ability to upgrade or maintain their homes and many have to go through complex processes to install air conditioning.

In February 2021 the ABC reported that residents of Melbourne's public housing towers were sleeping in stairwells to avoid spending time in their hot apartments. Conversations with public housing tower residents across Melbourne revealed that residents of all ages will spend hours outside their homes, sometimes until late at night, because the temperatures in their homes are uncomfortable or unsafe.

In Summer 2023 we visited a public housing estate in the Melbourne suburb of Flemington to speak to residents about where they go on hot days. All of the residents of the tower are over 55 years old, therefore the majority, if not all of them would be categorised as vulnerable to heat-related disease due to age, chronic illnesses, medications or other co-morbidities.

The majority of residents told us that they get their weather information from television or radio weather updates. When asked about what facilities or amenities they would like to have at a cool place on a hot day, the residents said that kitchen facilities to have a cup of tea or coffee, cold water, quiet spaces and socialising were high priorities. The majority of residents we spoke to said that they find it difficult to leave the apartment complex on hot days because local public transport is not accessible and it was too hot to walk far.

The residents told us that if they leave their apartments on hot days they will frequently go to the air conditioned community room at the bottom of the towers. These rooms were closed for two years during the covid-19 pandemic and the residents either had to stay in their apartments, or go to venues such as the local tavern. One resident said that the pokies room of the local tavern was his go-to location to keep cool because of the air conditioning and free coffee.



The community room in the Flemington public housing tower that was closed for over two years due to the covid-19 pandemic

In the 2023 budget the Victorian Government announced \$141 million funding for installing air conditioning for residents in 40 public housing towers in Melbourne. This is a significant win for the community and organisations such as CoHealth who work with the residents. Advocates are also calling for solar power to be installed to reduce the financial pressure on residents who want to use their new air conditioning on hot days.

Other ideas for what people want in a cool safe space:

- Medical assistance
- Wifi or internet
- Charging points
- Quiet spaces
- Comfortable seating
- Places to rest and work
- Somewhere to swim
- A place for pets
- Toilets
- Fans
- Shady outside places

"Because my bicycle is my main mode of transportation, I tend to stay home on very hot days even when it is unbearable because I need to weigh this up against extra heat stress from even a short ride to a cooler location (where I'll probably be required to spend money to enjoy the benefits of climate control)."

-Preston

"I am lucky and have a fully air conditioned home, but that is a minority experience among all the people I know. My friends often come over on hot days because my house is always cool."

-Winmalee

"My neighbours live in public housing. The buildings get very hot and the windows open only a few centimetres. There is no air conditioning and no solar panels to help with energy costs. The buildings need to be retro-fitted to make them fit for purpose in changing climate conditions."

-Carlton

"I would like it very much if I did not have to go somewhere else to keep cool on a hot day. For example, if the neighbourhood built environment had more natural shade, and if the property I rent was better insulated."

-Brunswick West

Recommendations

1

Invest in making homes heatwave safe, starting with the most marginalised communities

The number of people impacted by extreme heat at the same time makes it impractical for any significant number of people to seek relief in designated cool safe spaces. Western Sydney alone is home to over 2.5 million people. We must urgently improve building standards and fund widespread retro-fit programs for heatwave safe homes.

2

Support community centres, libraries, neighbourhood houses and other organisations to be cool safe spaces

Respondents identified that they would like comfortable spaces with amenities, water and food. Community run spaces where people already go for services may be well placed to play this role, but are often underfunded and understaffed. Fund these organisations to create locally appropriate cool safe spaces and stay open longer without creating an additional financial burden on already tight budgets.

3

Create local heatwave response teams

These teams can provide health outreach, support people to get to a cool safe space, check in on vulnerable people and share an on-the-ground perspective of heat crises.

4

Make public and active transport heatwave safe

Public transport should be accessible and safe during heatwaves. This means that bus stops should have shade and seats, services should be frequent and busses and trams should be accessible. Hot, unshaded streets were named as a barrier to leaving hot homes, so increasing our urban green cover will enable people to leave the house or seek medical care during heatwaves.