

# Extreme Heat for Workers: How Can They Be Protected?

## Evidence and Action for Policymakers, Advocates, and Employers

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A new WorkRise-funded brief, “Extreme Heat at Work: More than 1 in 7 Outdoor Workers Experienced Heat Exhaustion or Heat-Related Symptoms at Their Jobs in 2023,” provides the first nationally representative estimates of workers affected by extreme heat at their jobs, using 2023 data from the Urban Institute’s “Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey.” The brief’s principal investigators estimate the share of workers, ages 18 to 64, exposed to extreme heat based on their work environment and assess the health impacts of the heat, how it varies based on job characteristics and demographics, and whether workers with the greatest exposure to extreme heat can secure workplace protections through union membership and/or state workplace safety laws.

WorkRise staff has synthesized the brief’s findings and recommendations to inform the next steps for policymakers, advocates, and employers to change policy and practice.

### Federal Policymakers

**Expand proposed federal heat protections to exposed workers across all employers and industries:** One in seven outdoor workers, and about one in ten workers in non-climate-controlled indoor workplaces, report heat exhaustion and other heat-related symptoms at work. To enhance protections for workers against heat-related occupational health risks, federal policymakers and agencies could implement the proposed federal heat safety rule to cover all indoor and outdoor workers across all employers and industries—not just those subject to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) authority. Workers left out of the 2024 proposed rule include state and local public sector workers in states without OSHA-approved state plans, mining workers who are generally regulated by the Mine Safety and Health Administration, and other types of workers. The proposed federal heat protections include providing water, rest breaks, shaded areas, air conditioning and ventilation in indoor areas, protective equipment, acclimatization, training, monitoring for heat-related symptoms, and much more.

**Prioritize monitoring and enforcement for high-risk workers:** Workers in certain occupations are more likely to be exposed to extreme heat. Nearly four in five workers in agriculture, mining, and construction jobs work outside some of the time. Low-wage workers are more likely than high-wage workers to work outdoors (two in five low-wage workers) and experience heat-related symptoms at work (one in eight low-wage workers). Federal policymakers and agencies can focus monitoring and enforcement efforts on workers who are at the highest risk for heat-related health issues, with serious penalties for noncompliant employers.

## State and Local Policymakers

**Adopt state and local protections:** Most workers exposed to extreme heat are not protected by state laws: four in five outdoor workers and six in seven indoor workers in non-climate-controlled settings live in a state without heat protection standards. States with some heat protections are California, Colorado, Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington. State and local governments can pass legislation promoting safety measures that are tailored to specific communities' climate risks and labor market characteristics. However, new legislation may not be a solution for workers in states like Texas and Florida, where state legislation prevents local governments from enacting their own heat safety measures for workers. Efforts to protect workers in these states would need to prioritize other policy strategies and awareness campaigns.

## Labor Organizers

**Promote labor negotiations and other forms of collective bargaining and worker advocacy to address gaps in heat protection:** More than four in five workers exposed to extreme heat—those who work outdoors or indoors in non-climate-controlled settings—are not union members. In industries with union representation, labor organizers can prioritize heat protection standards and education about heat-related health risks. Policymakers could also support a range of collective bargaining strategies to close gaps in heat protections that federal standards do not fully cover. In industries or regions where traditional unions have weakened or may not exist, alternative forms of worker power, such as worker centers and informal worker organizations, could play a more active role.

## Employers

**Launch comprehensive campaigns to educate employers and workers on heat-related health risks and protections and encourage proactive action and changes to the workplace:** Awareness campaigns by governments or nonprofits can be effective tools for educating employers and workers about who is vulnerable to dangerous forms of heat exposure, heat-related health dangers, and productivity losses from occupational heat exposure. For instance, two in five young adults, ages 18 to 24, are more likely than those in other age groups to work outdoors. Half of Hispanic men work outside and more than one in six have experienced heat stroke or other heat-related symptoms at work. These campaigns could encourage proactive, voluntary action by employers to redesign their workplace and jobs to limit heat exposure and emphasize workers' existing and new rights.

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For more insights on these findings and recommendations, see the full brief by Lisa Clemans-Cope, Dulce Gonzalez, Sara McTarnaghan, and Michael Karpman at <https://www.workrisenetwork.org/publications/extreme-heat-work>.