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ENVIRONMENT

'You don't have to shovel sunshine': Amid heat waves, why do people still move to Phoenix?

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As temperatures finally cool into the 80s and autumn settles in the city, many Phoenix residents will tell out-of-town friends this is the time of year that makes living in America's hottest big city worthwhile.

But a few months ago, the region's record-breaking summer made international headlines and those out-of-town friends might have wondered why anyone would want to live in a place so hot.

In July, leaving the house felt like stepping into an oven during the month-long streak of days over 110 degrees. Hospitalizations from heat-related illnesses rose, and residents turned down their thermostats waiting for a reprieve. Even the state's iconic saguaros, cactuses that are adapted to the heat, began collapsing from scorching temperatures and lack of monsoon rains.

Temperatures peaked at 119 degrees three times, and July became the hottest month on record for a U.S. city. This year, Phoenix recorded 54 days at or above 110 degrees, breaking another record.

And yet people keep coming. From retired snowbirds fed up with freezing temperatures to young professionals chasing job opportunities, thousands of Americans are migrating to Maricopa County. Phoenix is not only the warmest urban area in the United States, but consistently one of the fastest-growing.

Experts studying domestic migration trends found more Americans are fleeing cities prone to natural disasters like hurricanes and moving to areas where prolonged heat waves occur, even as heat-related illness and death take a growing toll.

For years, the warm weather was one of the main attributes that made Phoenix appeal to many people. With increasing job opportunities, a strong economy, picturesque natural landscapes and warm, dry winters, metro Phoenix has attracted Americans of all ages from around the country.

“There’s so much more opportunity here, and yes, the summers get hot, but you don’t have to shovel sunshine,” said Sydnie Mickelson, a 29-year-old Biltmore resident who moved to the area in 2018. “I will take over 110 degrees for three to four months over eight months of winter.

Since 2012, over 800,000 people have moved to metro Phoenix, according to 2022 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Maricopa County, with a population of over 4.6 million people, has more new residents than any other county.

Scientists project global temperatures will rise from planet-warming fossil fuels over the next few decades, causing more frequent natural disasters and prolonged heat waves that pose health and safety risks. It's unclear how hotter conditions could affect migration to Arizona.

Still, most current and prospective Phoenix residents are not overly concerned about the heat just yet.

Climate and housing: As Arizona builds to solve a housing crisis, will its homes withstand future heat extremes?

Will Phoenix’s population boom recede as temperatures rise?

While retirees are known for flocking to warmer states, they are not the only age group who prefer sunny climates. Researchers found people of all ages are moving to metropolitan areas with regular high temperatures, despite public health risks.

A 2022 study examining domestic migration trends by county from 2010 to 2020 discovered more people are moving toward areas that are also affected by wildfires and urban heat. They tend to flee regions with hurricanes in favor of warmer winters, hotter summers and lower humidity.

“As we’re starting to get into climate change and get these unprecedented levels of heat in places like Phoenix, I’ll be curious to see if there is a tipping point, but I don’t think we’ve reached it yet,” said Mahalia Clark, a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Vermont and lead researcher for the study.

Clark acknowledges choosing where to move is a complex personal decision outside of climate concerns. Southwestern migration hotspots tend to have growing cities, job opportunities and socioeconomic benefits, but she believes as people choose a place to live, they should begin factoring in climate and the potential hazards they may face.

The findings highlighted migration trends moving west and south to warmer climates. Americans are often more concerned with snow, hurricanes and freezing temperatures than blistering heat.

“Something like a heat wave is less visible and can get less attention. It’s this long, slow, gradual event as opposed to something shocking like a hurricane or a fire,” Clark said. “If (extreme heat) becomes the new normal and happens every summer, then we’ll have to see whether that’s enough to disincentivize people.”

Record toll: Maricopa County approaching 500 heat-associated deaths in 2023

Young adults are putting down roots in Phoenix

With job and educational opportunities, a thriving desert cultural scene and the warm weather, young people have been relocating to the Phoenix metro.

Mickelson, the Biltmore resident, works in marketing and moved to Phoenix when she was 24. She spent most of her life in Marquette, Michigan, a city with frequent sub-zero temperatures and several feet of snow in the winter.

In 2019, a year after Mickelson moved to Phoenix, Marquette surpassed 200 inches of snow during the winter.

“The heat is definitely worrisome, but it’s not anything that would chase me away like the cold, cold winters would," Mickelson said. "But I haven’t had to go through a breaking AC or anything like that.”

One Mesa mother experienced a broken air conditioning system over the summer, and she admits the ordeal made her rethink her long-term plans to stay in metro Phoenix.

The industry-standard HVAC system in Anna Stoddard’s new-build home is rated to keep the interior 20 degrees cooler than the outside temperature. During continuous days over 110 degrees, her unit became overworked from trying to keep her home at 80 degrees.

Stoddard, a 32-year-old Colorado native, lives with her three dogs and four children, who range in age from 4 to 13. Using a handheld thermometer, she recorded temperatures over

100 degrees in her children's bedrooms. At one point, the thermometer read 116 degrees in her upstairs bedroom.

For days, Stoddard shared a small bedroom with her kids and dogs. They struggled to stay cool with two portable AC units and window insulation as they waited for overbooked HVAC technicians to repair her system.

"It was miserable. It was emotionally draining," Stoddard said. "I was struggling to explain to my children why they couldn't play and run around when that's all they wanted to do."

Stoddard posted TikTok videos documenting her AC outage and sharing quick fixes, and the videos went viral, garnering millions of views.

She spent thousands of dollars on hotel and Airbnb stays, window and portable AC units that could not compete with the heat and multiple HVAC repair visits until a local technician temporarily fixed her unit. The technician placed a 'band-aid' on her unit, which has kept her home at an 80-degree minimum as she waits for a back-ordered part that was to arrive last month.

While Stoddard's situation is a worst-case scenario of living in the Phoenix area during a record-breaking summer, she is one of millions trying to make a life here.

"I've never been a fan of living here because of the heat," Stoddard said. Despite her qualms, Stoddard had previously planned to stay until her children are grown up.

"If this is something that's going to be a continuous thing where I'm spending three or four grand because our AC keeps going out, I won't be able to afford to live here," she said.

She worries for her children's health during the heat, concerns that have been exacerbated by their air conditioning outage. Stoddard constantly monitors her kids in hot weather, encouraging them to drink water and take breaks.

"It's a really scary thing as a mom. They just don't seem to recognize how hot it is," she said. "They will go outside and run around until they are redder than a tomato."

Heat and health: Laws don't protect outdoor workers from heat. Advocates say the consequences are deadly

Extreme heat makes some populations especially vulnerable

Children, older adults and Phoenix's unhoused population are especially at risk of heat-related illness when temperatures soar.

When it's well over 100 degrees, most people can be outside for 15 to 30 minutes without a problem. As time outside and in direct sunlight approaches an hour, the heat can become dangerous, especially for vulnerable populations.

Young children may struggle to recognize the signs of heat-related illness. They usually do not have the experience or knowledge that a headache or dizziness while playing outside could be the first signs of heat stress.

"In some of our research with kids, even when they're hot and uncomfortable, they want to keep playing," said Jennifer Vanos, a professor from the School of Sustainability at Arizona State University who studies extreme heat and its health impacts.

Children also sweat less because they have fewer sweat glands. While this means there is a lower chance of dehydration, they will not cool off as quickly as adults.

Despite being a top destination for retirees, older adults are also at risk from extreme heat in metro Phoenix.

"As we age, our body isn't able to thermoregulate as well as when we were younger," Vanos said. "Also, older adults tend to have certain pre-existing conditions that make them much more vulnerable to heat."

People with cardiovascular disease are at an elevated risk when exposed to high temperatures. When the body tries to cool itself, the heart works harder and faster to help expel heat. People on medications to slow their heartbeat may have difficulty lowering their body temperature.

Adapting to heat: More homes mean more heat. Can new building codes help save metro Phoenix from disaster?

The hottest — and warmest — retiree destination

Maricopa County is home to the Sun Cities, the oldest retirement communities in the U.S. Opened in 1960, the original Sun City was advertised as a haven for adults 55 and older. It helped make metro Phoenix the popular retiree destination it continues to be today.

While cities in Florida and Pennsylvania have become increasingly popular for retirees in recent years, Sun City and other communities in the area still thrive. Older adults are drawn to promises of warm winters and days spent lounging at the pool or putting on the green.

The Michigan Friends in Sun City Club meets several times a month so former Midwesterners can socialize and reminisce on their time living in Michigan. It is one of over 120 Sun City clubs, alongside clubs for fellow Phoenix transplants like the New England Club, Illinois Club and Wisconsin Club.

During the club's October meeting, Holly Peterson, a 65-year-old retiree from Midland, Michigan, shared a common question asked among Sun City residents.

"Are you a bird or a frog? Are you a snowbird and you come and go, or are you a frog and you'll be here until you croak," Peterson joked, talking about her decision to live in Sun City permanently. "I'm going from a bird to a frog."

Although many older people are part-time Maricopa residents, heading north for the summer to avoid the worst of the heat, other retirees like Tom and Jane Kalchik live here year-round.

"Jane has rheumatoid arthritis, so the environment is good for her in the wintertime especially, and we didn't want to deal with the snow and ice," said Tom Kalchik, a 76-year-old club member from Lansing. "In Michigan, you live inside in the wintertime, and here you live inside in the summertime."

The warm, dry climate is beneficial to those with medical conditions like arthritis and respiratory illnesses. Residents also have access to the slew of doctors' offices in the surrounding area instead of driving miles to get to a specialist in Michigan. Almost all the club members love living in Arizona, happy to trade in their snow shovels for a set of golf clubs.

But outdoor activities can become dangerous for those 65 and older when temperatures surpass 100 degrees. To avoid the heat, many residents have adapted their routines and habits.

They choose early-morning tee times and grocery runs to be back indoors before peak afternoon temperatures. Sun City residents take advantage of the community pools and indoor recreation spaces, moving from an air-conditioned house, to an air-conditioned car, to an air-conditioned facility.

“You’ve got to make sure your air conditioning works and you maintain that. But we’re not really concerned," Tom Kalchik said. "I know it’s probably going to get warmer, but we’re well situated to live with it.”

Learning to live with the heat

While the heat has not deterred many residents from living in metro Phoenix, federal, state and local governments are addressing heat concerns and taking action to shield vulnerable residents.

In 2021, Phoenix created the first publicly funded heat response office in the country. The Heat Response and Mitigation office leads efforts to protect people from extreme heat and cool the city overall.

Maricopa County also has created the Heat Relief Network, a partnership of municipalities, businesses and organizations that provide water and cooling stations and water donation areas throughout the county to combat heat-related illness.

Whether people are planning a move southwest or have already settled there, Clark believes it’s important to consider how individuals can plan for regional climate dangers. She recommends using resources like Risk Factor, an online tool that calculates a property’s risk to environmental threats like extreme heat, wildfires and flooding.

“As climate change advances, heat, fire, storms and flooding are going to get worse,” Clark said. “It's really a good thing for individuals to be aware of their own risk and for communities to be thinking about, planning and investing in resiliency to these hazards.”

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