

Lessons from 2009 used to reduce lethal dangers

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RESEARCHERS have mapped the locations of vulnerable people during heatwaves in Australian cities in a study intended to help communities manage health risks in extreme heat.

The team of Monash University researchers, funded by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Fund, found the geographic areas of greatest concern were those with high proportions of elderly residents, non-English-speaking homes, and hot urban areas that lacked vegetation.

Margaret Loughnan, who led the study, said the researchers had examined periods of extreme heat in Australian cities over the past decade, and used mortality and morbidity rates to identify threshold temperatures above which the risk of death or illness was increased.

Dr Loughnan said heatwaves harmed more people in Australia than any other natural event, and policymakers, interest groups and the broader community needed to work together on ways to avoid heat-related deaths.

She said urban planners needed to be more mindful of creating greener, cooler environments. "Threshold temperatures can be used to calculate and issue heat alerts to relevant emergency services in each city two or three days prior, allowing them to prepare for increases in service demands and save lives," Dr Loughnan said.

Health authorities believe Victoria's record-breaking heatwave of 2009 may have contributed to the deaths of 374 people.

Ambulance Victoria operations manager Paul Holman said paramedics knew from experience that the poor, socially isolated, elderly and infirm were at greatest risk during extreme heat events.

"We've taken many messages from the experience we had during the 2009 heatwave, and we're not expecting to see those kinds of impacts here again," he said.