

Introduction: Confronting Climate Change in Correctional Facilities

Fall Symposium, October 22, 2025

Berkeley Law

I. FRAMING THE SYMPOSIUM: WHY “CONFRONTING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES” MATTERS.

In the fall of 2025, the *Berkeley Journal of Criminal Law* and Berkeley Criminal Law and Justice Center hosted its third annual symposium focusing on the timely topic of confronting climate change in correctional facilities. While our modern society grapples with the effects of a rapidly changing climate in a myriad of ways, focusing on correctional facilities highlights the severity of how this universal issue results in gravely disproportionate impacts.

Prisons and jails are uniquely vulnerable to climate impacts: often located in geographic areas facing extreme environmental conditions, they are designed with aging infrastructure lacking in sufficient ventilation, cooling systems, and emergency response protocol. As extreme heat, wildfires, and flooding become more severe, these inadequate conditions transform carceral facilities into high-risk environments bearing disproportionate harm on those who are not free to leave.

Confronting climate change in correctional facilities sits at the intersection of environmental policy, public health, legal advocacy, and grassroots organizing. It is a dynamic and nuanced issue that affects not only those incarcerated but all those who operate within the prison walls, like prison doctors and correctional officers. It extends beyond prison walls, impacting a wider community of researchers, organizers, and advocates whose work allows them mobility to move between prisons and the free world. The symposium brought together medical professionals, researchers, civil rights attorneys, journalists, and policymakers. By bringing together a diverse group of speakers, the symposium sought to break down professional silos and build cross-disciplinary partnerships to force institutions to establish meaningful protections that honor human dignity.

Finally, confronting climate change in correctional facilities forces a broader reckoning with those whose lives are prioritized when it comes to

climate policy. Incarcerated people are frequently excluded from public discourse and climate response strategies, despite facing some of the most acute risks. Yet, despite understanding this truth, as organizers of this event, our own positionality as law students at an elite institution influenced our ability to bring the voices of those directly impacted to light. Although we had hoped to include the perspective of someone with lived experience of incarceration at the symposium, logistical constraints impeded our ability to do so. While bringing attention to the conditions of those incarcerated to policymakers, scholars, researchers, and advocates can encourage movement toward a more inclusive version of climate response, until the voices of those most impacted are also centered, tangible change is limited.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES INCLUDED

This edition reflects a composition of pieces that focus on a range of issues that arose during the discussions at the symposium. First, Samantha B. Pourciau, J.D., a staff attorney with the Promise of Justice Initiative (“PJI”), uses *VOTE et al. v. LeBlanc et al.* as a case study in how to confront climate change in correctional facilities, in *Confronting Climate Change in a Correctional Facility in the Deep South: Litigating Forced Labor in High Heat on a Plantation Prison*. Second, in *The Real Cost of Cooling: The Purchasing Power of California’s Incarcerated Workers as a Limit to Climate Adaptation*, Bharat Venkat, Ph.D., M.A., of the UCLA Heat Lab discusses “thermal inequality” by analyzing the commissary system in relation to cooling technologies. Third, Rachel Sklar, Ph.D., M.P.H., an Assistant Professor at the University of Washington and Elizabeth Noth, Ph.D., M.P.H., C.I.H., Senior Industrial Hygienist at Cal/OSHA Research and Standards reflect on the panel symposium discussion on how climate change is experienced inside carceral settings and why existing legal and regulatory frameworks have failed to prevent preventable climate related health risks, in *Climate Risk, Regulation, and Health in Carceral Settings*.

In addition to the pieces from three of the panelists featured at the symposium, we are excited to include two student pieces in this year’s edition. In *Uninhabitable Prisons: A Reflection on the Symposium Keynote Panel on the Political Will and Financial Pathways to Address the Climate Crisis in Prisons*, Alice Choi, third-year law student at Berkeley and Editor-in-Chief of the *Berkeley Journal of Criminal Law*, expands on the keynote symposium panel, contextualizing the panelists’ insights within constitutional doctrine, environmental justice literature, and California’s political realities. Neil Gallagher, a second-year law student at Berkeley, focuses on the effects of hurricanes in Florida prisons, utilizing his personal experiences as a person formerly incarcerated in Florida as the backdrop to discuss the impact of climate change on work release programs in his piece, *Locked In, Left Behind*.

III. SYMPOSIUM PANELS

The Symposium occurred on October 22, 2025, at the International House at the University of California, Berkeley. Over 100 people attended the all-day gathering, to hear from panelists from all over the country, including Louisiana and Texas. Chesa Boudin, the Founding Executive Director of the Criminal Law & Justice Center, introduced the symposium with opening remarks. The symposium included four panels and one legal breakout room, specifically for legal practitioners in the field to share insights on cases and litigation strategies.

A. *Panel One: “Mapping What We Know About Climate Impacts in Correctional Facilities.”*

Dr. Rachel Sklar, Ph.D., M.P.H., Assistant Professor at the University of Washington, moderated Panel One. The featured panelists were:

1. Elizabeth Noth, Ph.D., M.P.H., C.I.H., Sr. Industrial Hygienist, Cal/OSHA Research & Standards.
2. Dr. Helen Jack, M.D., Assistant Professor, University of Washington, and Primary Care Physician, Washington Department of Corrections.
3. David Cloud, Ph.D., J.D., Postdoctoral Researcher, Duke University School of Medicine.
4. Dr. Alison Pachynski, M.D., M.P.H., Chief Medical Executive, San Quentin Rehabilitation Center.

The panelists discussed actual conditions inside prisons, such as indoor temperatures exceeding 90°F with no air conditioning, hazardous air quality from wildfires, and flooding risks. Panelists emphasized that vulnerable groups, including the elderly and those with mental health conditions, bear the brunt of these hazards, leading to increased violence and self-harm during extreme heat.

B. *Panel Two: “Strategic Alliances: Collaborations between Lawyers, Experts, Journalists & Advocates.”*

Rio Scharf, Criminal Law & Justice Center Staff Attorney, moderated Panel Two. The featured panelists were:

1. Jeffrey S. Edwards, J.D., Partner, Edwards Law.
2. Dr. Susi U. Vasallo, M.D., Emergency Medicine Physician, NYU Langone.
3. Amite Dominick, Ph.D., Founder/President, Texas Prisons Community Advocates.
4. Alleen Brown, Senior Editor for Drilled Media and independent investigative journalist.

The panelists explored how journalists, lawyers, and advocates can collaborate to challenge unconstitutional conditions. Experts discussed using data mapping and storytelling to generate public outrage and highlighted that failing to mitigate known, deadly heat risks constitutes a constitutional violation.

C. Panel Three: “Lightning Talk Sessions: Research Approaches to Climate and Carceral Health.”

Panel Three highlighted presentations from four key researchers in the field:

1. Ufuoma Oviemhada, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Arizona – Dr. Ufuoma Oviemhada employed geospatial data science to show that 70% of prisons have experienced hotter temperatures in the last four years than their 20-year baseline averages. Her research also revealed that one-third of prisons have higher levels of particulate matter (PM 2.5) than their host states and identified an “urban heat island effect” where prison concrete makes facilities hotter than the surrounding landscape.

2. Cecilia Martindale, P.h.D Student, University of Washington – Cecilia Martindale presented findings on indoor air quality, noting that carceral workers face a 5-15% higher risk of lung cancer and cardiovascular disease due to wildfire smoke infiltration.

3. Katherine LeMasters, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Colorado – Dr. Katherine LeMasters introduced “Forensic Vulnerability Modeling,” which uses 3D spatial modeling and interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals to illustrate how prison infrastructure and climate hazards interact/ Her research highlighted how extreme temperatures lead to a profound loss of autonomy and dehumanization for those inside.

4. Bharat Venkat, Ph.D., M.A., Associate Professor and Director of UCLA Heat Lab – Dr. Bharat Venkat of the UCLA Heat Lab detailed “thermal inequality” by analyzing the commissary system in relation to cooling technologies. Dr. Venkat found that an incarcerated person must work approximately 128.6 hours (over three weeks of full-time labor) to afford a cooling fan that a non-incarcerated person could buy with just 1.5 hours of wages. We are lucky to be able to publish Dr. Venkat’s study in this symposium edition.

D. Legal Breakout Room: Practitioners Share Insight

Concurrently, during Panel Three, legal practitioners participated in a break-out room to share insight on cases and litigation strategies. Participants were invited to collaborate and share practical advice for litigation and advocacy.

E. Panel Four: “Making the Case: Political Will and Financial Pathways to Address the Crisis.”

Dr. Stefano M. Bertozzi, M.D., Ph.D., Professor at UC Berkeley Public Health, moderated Panel Four, which featured:

1. Nancy Skinner, Current Commissioner of the California Energy Commission, Former California State Senator and Budget Committee Chair.
2. Amarik K Singh, Current Inspector General, State of California.

3. Felix Owusu, Assistant Professor, Goldman School of Public Policy.

Here, panelists addressed the obstacles to reform, like California's estimated \$28 billion cost for prison cooling improvements and the impact of budget deficits. Nancy Skinner called for the closure of outdated and dangerous facilities as an avenue to address extreme heat issues. Further, she called for robust evacuation plans as we see the increase of climate disasters. Felix Owusu discussed how racial prejudice and a lack of empathy often reduce political sympathy for making prisons livable and render emergency evacuation plans for incarcerated populations low on the priority lists. Alice Choi's piece in this edition expands on this panel, contextualizing the panelists' insights within constitutional doctrine, environmental justice literature, and California's political realities.

IV. CONCLUSION

While the topics discussed at the symposium and included in this edition span a wide range of issues and responses, the conversations that took place make one fact undeniably clear: confronting climate change in correctional facilities is not a peripheral issue, it is an urgent and unavoidable one. The insights shared by panelists, symposium attendees, and published authors underscore the depth of this crisis and the range of tools available to address it. They also reveal the persistent racial, structural, political, and moral barriers that continue to hinder effective change.

Our hope is that this edition not only documents the conversations had, but extends them and inspires changemakers – whether it be lawyers, activists, or researchers – to address this urgent issue.

Gratefully,

Isa Berardo and Corey Smith
Co-Symposium Editors, 2025-2026