Fossil-Fueled Warming Drives Surge in European Heat Deaths

Scientists urge governments to expand targeted health measures to better protect vulnerable populations.

By Bob Berwyn October 22, 2026, Inside Climate News

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Heat-related deaths in Europe's urban areas exceeded 50,000 in the summer of 2026, as repeated waves of record-breaking temperatures swept across the continent from late May through August.

More than 32,000 of those deaths were attributable to human-caused global warming, driven primarily by the burning of fossil fuels, according to studies published in Nature Health.

Urban areas of Europe's major economies, Italy, France, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, recorded the highest estimated death tolls. The work by researchers at the Imperial College London and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine warns that Europe's cities are struggling to keep pace with the growing health risks posed by extreme heat.

"This summer has been another dramatic reminder that climate change is everybody's problem," said co-author Pierre Masselot, a health researcher at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

The research findings point to the growing reach of heat-related mortality beyond the oldest and most vulnerable populations and underscore the need for governments to improve adaptation efforts, including expanding health care for populations most vulnerable to extreme heat, he said.

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Scientists examined 854 urban areas across 30 European countries, covering about 40 percent of the population. The countries included the 27 European Union member states, plus Norway, the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

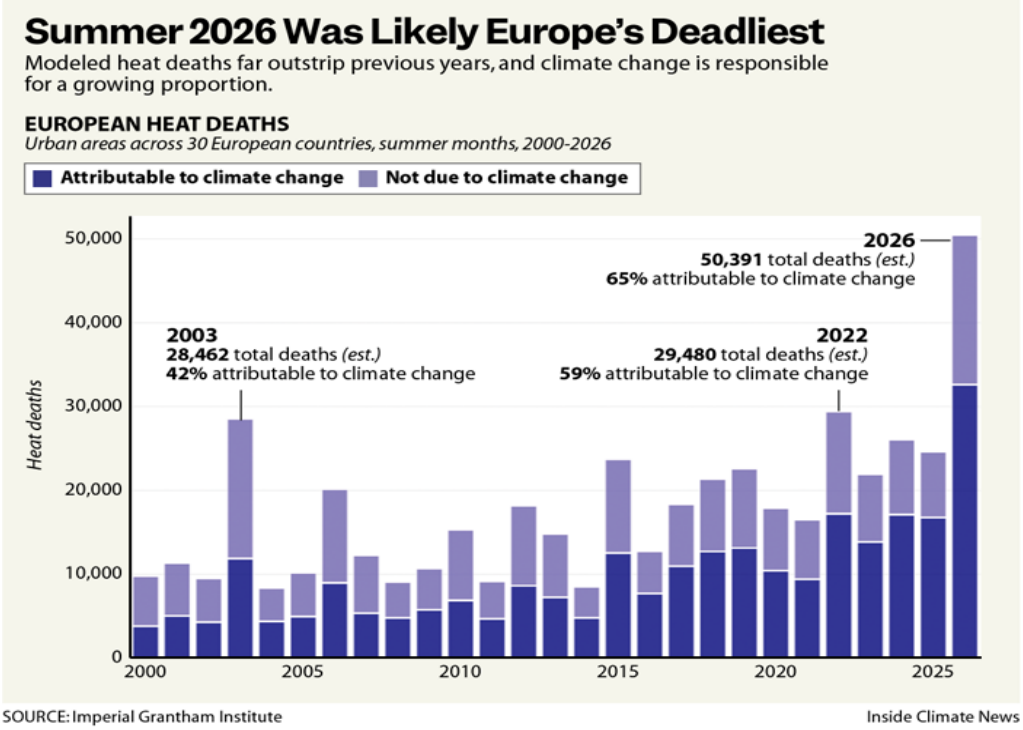
They compared actual summer temperatures with a model of what they would have been without human-caused warming, then combined it with historical data on heat and death rates to estimate monthly heat mortality. The late-June heat wave was the deadliest, accounting for about a third of the summer's total mortality.

Between June 17 and July 1, daily mean temperatures across the entire region were more than 9 degrees Fahrenheit (5 degrees Celsius) above the 1991 to 2020 average. The scientists concluded that, as "fossil-fuel driven climate change has pushed temperatures higher, the proportion of deaths attributable to climate change has grown too."

During the summer of 2003, the proportion of heat-related deaths attributable to human-caused warming was 42 percent; in 2022 it reached 59 percent and rose to 65 percent this year, one of the two new papers shows.

The historical comparison comes from the study examining summers from 2000 to 2025. The second paper, which has been accepted for publication, applies the same analysis for the summer of 2026. Together, the analyses show how the share of heat-related deaths attributable to human-caused warming has increased over time.

Behind these statistics are "real people whose lives were lost and real families who grieve for them," said Clair Barnes, a research associate at the Grantham Institute, Imperial College London, who focuses on how climate change affects extreme weather. Targeted interventions to protect the most vulnerable people are urgently needed, said Barnes, the lead author of both papers.



The research also highlights **the growing need to "rapidly transition away from fossil fuels to slow the pace of change and limit future warming**," she added.

With the extreme heat this past summer, mortality soared in northern regions like the United Kingdom that are traditionally cooler. People older than 85 accounted for more than half the total heat-related deaths, but the study also showed that, across the 30 countries, 6,000 people under the age of 65 died during heat waves.

Age isn't the only factor that makes people more vulnerable, said co-author Garyfallos Konstantinoudis, a health and heat researcher at the Grantham Institute, Imperial College London. In a study published in early October, he and other researchers found more heat deaths in populations that are "socially deprived." That includes limited access to education and other key social vulnerability factors, Konstantinoudis said.

The estimated death toll of 4,500 in the United Kingdom serves as a warning that other areas with historically moderate climates need to prepare for extreme heat impacts now, said Andrew Hartle, a professor of anesthesia at Imperial College London and an intensive care consultant at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust.

In the U.K., summer is usually the quietest time of the year for health emergencies, but the heat drove demand for care and strained hospitals to levels usually only seen during a severe winter flu season. Patients were overheating while receiving treatment for other conditions, and the heat increased the risk of medical equipment failure, he said.

Much of the country's hospital infrastructure is "not built to withstand these temperatures," Hartle added.

The summer's extreme heat also helped spark some of the largest public climate protests since the height of the Fridays For Future movement in 2019. About 40,000 people demonstrated in Amsterdam in mid-September, followed by tens of thousands more joining subsequent protests in Germany, Belgium and Austria.

Across the demonstrations, protesters called on their governments to do more to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect people from extreme heat.

Article link: https://insideclimatenews.org/news/22102026/fossil-fueled-warming-drives-surge-in-european-heat-deaths/

(AA note: And we should ask, how many Americans must die from the heat before Trump acknowledges climate change?)