The Overlooked Issue of Temperature in Detention

by Mia Zitzlaff

In the ongoing conversation about detention conditions, temperature is rarely a headline issue. It lacks the visibility that accompanies issues of detention conditions, such as overcrowding or harsh lighting. However, for people in detention, temperature can be a daily, inescapable issue that can have serious consequences for physical health, mental well-being, and basic human dignity.

At a recent workshop on *Expanding Global Understandings of the Environmental Conditions of Detention*, a joint project between the University of Edinburgh and the UK National Preventive Mechanism, participants explored a wide range of issues affecting people deprived of liberty. One dedicated session addressed a particularly overlooked concern, namely the impact of temperature. Bringing together academics, practitioners, human rights monitors, and formerly incarcerated individuals, the session underscored an urgent but often neglected truth: temperature regulation is a human rights issue.

Standards: What is "Too Hot" or "Too Cold"?

Many jurisdictions do not define maximum or even context-sensitive minimum temperatures in detention settings. In the UK, for example, there is no strict legal requirement for temperatures in detention and no policy guidance, save for suggestions from the Health and Safety Executive for the minimum temperature of 16°C in workplaces.[1] This gap in the legal framework leaves room for dangerous extremes, especially as climate change continues to escalate.

Participants in the workshop raised essential questions, such as:

- What should the absolute minimum and maximum be?
- Should standards vary by region or population?
- Can extreme weather protocols and trigger points be developed to guide urgent responses?

Vulnerability and Individual Experience: Not All Bodies Are the Same

Temperature affects everyone, but not equally. During discussions, participants in the workshop highlighted how gender, age, health status, and cultural background all play critical roles in thermal comfort:

- Women experience menopause, pregnancy, and menstrual cycles in environments without temperature-sensitive accommodations.
- Older adults and individuals with cardiovascular or respiratory conditions are at higher risk from the impacts of heat and cold.
- Children and young people in custody are still developing thermoregulation capacity and may be more vulnerable to extreme or irregular temperatures.
- Cultural differences shape perceptions of heat and cold, so what feels bearable to one person may feel punishing to another.

Despite these variances, detention environments are typically built and operated with a one-size-fits-all model, treating thermal comfort as secondary, or even irrelevant.

Autonomy and Comfort: The Power to Adapt

Autonomy over one's environment is deeply tied to dignity, yet people in detention often lack even the most basic forms of control over their temperature experience. What would autonomy look like in a custodial setting? -

- Access to blankets, sweaters, fans, or appropriate footwear.
- The ability to open or close windows or vents.
- Thermostat controls, or at least the right to request adjustments.
- Free dress policies that allow for layering or climate-appropriate clothing.[2]

In practice, however, many of these options are restricted, often due to security reasons, such as anti-ligature policies that ban heavy fabrics or limit the extent to which windows can open. Participants questioned whether these blanket policies are always justified, especially when the trade-off is long-term discomfort and suffering.

The Built Environment: Designed for Security, Not Comfort

Detention facilities are typically designed with security, control, and cost-efficiency in mind. This often results in buildings that are poorly ventilated, windowless, or sealed tight.

Air-tight cells trap heat in the summer and lose warmth in winter. Windowless or sealed rooms prevent airflow. Radiators or HVAC systems, where they exist, may be externally controlled and unresponsive to detainee needs. Even something as basic as curtains or blinds, used to manage sunlight, are often missing due to security concerns.

Moreover, environmental design in detention facilities has become increasingly rigid in response to climate and energy efficiency goals. One participant highlighted the tension this creates by pointing to net-zero energy policies: if a detention facility is being heated and a window is opened, energy is lost. However, the alternative, sealing off airflow entirely, risks creating stifling, inhumane conditions. Prioritising energy efficiency at the expense of basic comfort can ultimately erode the dignity and rights of those in detention.

The Role of Monitoring: Making Temperature Visible

One of the most concrete proposals from the session was for National Preventive Mechanisms (NPMs) and other monitoring bodies to carry thermometers during inspections. This simple practice would help make temperature a tangible metric for detention conditions.

Participants emphasized:

- Measuring at different times of day and in different parts of the facility (not just staff areas).
- Recording temperature alongside detainee complaints for better context.
- Developing a shared vocabulary among staff to discuss comfort, heat risk, and cold-related health issues.

Without data, complaints about temperature are too easily dismissed as subjective or exaggerated.

Cultural and Political Barriers: The "Tough on Crime" Mindset

Why hasn't temperature been taken seriously? One major obstacle is political resistance. There is a persistent belief that improving comfort in detention is a "luxury" or goes against the punitive nature of incarceration.

One participant noted that addressing thermal comfort in Scotland remains politically risky, with pushback not only from policymakers, but also the public. This reflects a wider societal view that conditions in criminal detention should be uncomfortable, as part of the punishment itself. This cultural resistance is compounded by staff attitudes, operational constraints, and fears of being seen as "soft."

As a result, efforts to introduce reform are unlikely to succeed without a shift in public and political discourse.

Temperature as a Human Rights Indicator

Temperature in detention is far more than a matter of comfort, it's a question of health, dignity, and human rights. Despite its profound impact on people deprived of liberty, it remains an underexplored and undervalued aspect of detention conditions. As climate change intensifies and vulnerable populations continue to be held in often inflexible, security-driven environments, the urgency to address thermal conditions grows. Meaningful reform will require legal standards, cultural change, and practical measures, like monitoring temperature during inspections, that centre on the lived experiences of detainees.

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