

Funding insolvency dates don't matter — insolvency does

BY CHARLES BLAHOUS

TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

To no one's surprise, the newly released 2026 Social Security and Medicare trustees reports paint a dire picture. Social Security's combined trust funds are still headed toward insolvency, as is the only Medicare trust fund that can even become insolvent. That may be why so many headlines focus on projections of exactly when the doomsdays will arrive: 2032 for Social Security's Old-Age and Survivor (OASI) Trust Fund and 2033 for Medicare's Hospital Insurance (HI) trust fund.

These dates aren't what matters. Social Security's shortfall easily could have been eliminated many years ago with a simple, modest tweak to the statutory formula that automatically increases benefits each year. Lawmakers, afraid of the politics of a "cut," procrastinated. Now, the substantive problem is much bigger, and so are the political obstacles.

The gap is now so large that Social Security can no longer be realistically cured by cost containment alone, tax increases alone or eligibility age adjustments alone. To fix the problem solely by increasing payroll taxes, the current 12.4% Social Security tax rate would need to rise overnight to 16.65% — something even the most left-leaning Congress wouldn't do. Even the most fiscally conservative Congress would not cut benefits for all new claimants by the necessary 30% across the board. Chopping these measures down to tolerable, politically realistic sizes requires blending them with each other and with eligibility age adjustments.

If lawmakers wait until near the projected depletion date of Social Security's combined trust funds (2034), even cutting off all new benefit claims entirely will not avert insolvency.

It's important not to become numb to these facts. At stake is nothing less than whether Social Security can remain a reliable source of benefits. There's a reason why it currently enjoys political support that welfare programs lack.

We finance welfare programs out of the general fund with our income taxes (which not everyone pays), while eligibility is a function of need. Taxpayers and welfare beneficiaries represent competing interests, so there is a continual renegotiation.

By contrast, people can and do make long-term income plans around their expected Social Security benefits, because these are tied to what participating workers contributed. That's why politicians can't arbitrarily take them away. But the structure works only as long as benefit formulas align with what payroll taxes can fund. Under current law, they don't.

If lawmakers don't fix that soon, we can't have this kind of Social Security system anymore. It would become just another program competing for funding in the general budget each year.

Medicare is in the same boat with Social Security in that Hospital Insurance will go insolvent unless lawmakers either reduce its costs (by 12%) or increase its tax collections. But its largest trust fund (Supplementary Medical Insurance, or SMI), which is growing even faster than HI, poses an additional problem.

Solvency is meaningless for Medicare SMI. SMI is automatically given whatever revenues it needs, charging higher premiums on participants and receiving increased funding from the general treasury. This is why Medicare is the single biggest driver of skyrocketing federal deficits.

The annual trustees' reports should serve as a wake-up call, and louder than the last. Swift and decisive measures are necessary to preserve Social Security and Medicare in the forms we Americans know, rely on, and support.

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About 5% of U.K. homes have air conditioning.



Young people seeking relief from the sweltering heat jump from a bridge into Paris's Canal Saint-Martin, above; closed blinds and empty balconies on a residential building in Berlin, below; a man on a train in London wipes away sweat, right. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LUDOVIC MARIN/ AFP/ GETTY IMAGES; KIN CHEUNG/ ASSOCIATED PRESS; FILIP SINGER/ EPA/ SHUTTERSTOCK

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People take refuge in an emergency heat-wave relief center in France's Bordeaux. PHILIPPE LOPEZ/ AFP/ GETTY IMAGES

Air Conditioning Polarizes Europe

Record heat challenges longstanding resistance, sparks political battles

BY MATTHEW DALTON

PARIS—Luca Funaro, a 32-year-old with a rare genetic illness, suffered through this month's recordbreaking heat wave in his apartment in the French capital without an air conditioning system. His neighbors won't allow one.

They have refused his requests to install a unit in the courtyard of his building in the Marais, a bustling neighborhood in central Paris. They said the device would be too loud. Funaro, who relies on a wheelchair and breathes with a ventilator, has taken the neighbors to court, his family spending thousands of dollars on a legal battle that has lasted two years and counting.

"If it's too hot, disabled people get dehydrated, and it's difficult to breathe," said Funaro.

Europeans have long shunned air conditioning, viewing it as noisy, a blight on their architectural heritage and, above all, unnecessary, as long as the summers were

mild. They feared widespread adoption of the energy-hungry technology would undermine their ambition to lead the fight against climate change.

That resistance, however, is colliding with the realities of a continent where temperatures are rising faster than any other region on the planet.

Years of record-breaking heat waves have placed strains on the continent's health systems as well as its economy. Thousands of schools across Western Europe, which are rarely air-conditioned, shut down during the latest heat wave, forcing many parents to stay home. Businesses closed; factories cut back production; rail lines were suspended. Economists at the Dutch bank ING said the heat wave "brought back memories of the pandemic lockdowns."

Political fight

The fight over the future of air conditioning is now shaping political debates across the continent, pitting politicians on the right, who want a massive plan to install air conditioning, against those on the left who fear the environmental impact.

"It is shameful that babies born in hospitals, that the sick, that the elderly are forced to endure such heat waves because they refuse to install air conditioning," far-right French leader Marine Le Pen said in a post on X. "These heat waves kill; we must implement a major air conditioning plan!"

European infrastructure was designed for a climate that was much cooler than today. Temperatures in the northern half of the continent rarely rose above 90 degrees Fahrenheit and temperatures over 100 were almost unheard of.

Rail lines and electrical grids weren't built to withstand extreme heat. Many of the continent's buildings lack design features that would keep them cooler in the summer, such as shutters to block out the sun.

Most of the continent's homes and institutions lack air conditioning. In Italy, around 56% of homes are equipped with the technology, a figure that falls to 25% in France and 5% in the U.K. Europe's summer heat waves often claim tens of thousands of lives, far more than in the U.S., a difference that scientists say is partly due to the lack of air conditioning.

The continent's infrastructure is being tested more quickly than officials and scientists anticipated just a few years ago. Europe is the fastest warming continent, with temperatures that are already around 2.5 degrees Celsius warmer than in the preindustrial era, compared with around 1.4 degrees for the earth as a whole.

Last week, Paris topped 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) on Wednesday and Thursday. That has only happened on three other days since official records began in the 19th century: in 1947, 2019 and 2022.

"We've always worked on the assumption that this scenario was possible starting in 2030, and especially from 2040 to 2050," said Audrey Pulvar, a deputy mayor of Paris. "Now we realize that we are already there."

Authorities across Europe have tried to avoid air conditioning on a large scale. The devices are costly; they are energy hungry; and they eject hot air into the street, warming cities even more. Moreover, they are a nuisance in dense urban neighborhoods, afflicting residents with the omnipresent hum of compressors.

"The goal isn't to be like some Italian, Brazilian, or American cities where you have entire rows, entire walls of convectors outside buildings that make an unbearable racket, releasing heat and toxic fumes," Pulvar said.

In London, city regulations require developers to adopt cooler design measures—natural ventilation, shutters on windows and better insulation—before installing air conditioning in new buildings. Paris and Berlin have plans to incorporate more plants into the city landscape, reducing the heat-magnifying effect of stone during a heat wave. Paris opened the Canal SaintMartin for swimming during the latest heat wave.

The problem is such measures are considerably less effective than air conditioning at reducing the threat of extreme heat, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the U.N.'s official climate science body. In its latest report on adaptation in Europe, the IPCC rates air conditioning as a highly-effective response to heat waves, while mechanical ventilation was rated medium-effectiveness and urban greenery was given a low rating.

Measures such as mechanical ventilation or shading don't work when the heat is relentless, experts say. During the latest heat wave, 85-degree Fahrenheit temperatures at night didn't allow buildings to cool down before the sun rose to bake them again.

Radhika Khosla, a climate scientist at Oxford University, said countries should mix better building design with air conditioning to limit the devices' energy consumption. "You want to use it for what it's really needed as opposed to making it your go-to solution," she said.

Across the region, the latest heat wave turned un-airconditioned hospitals and nursing homes into ovens. Doctors, nurses and patients were pasting reflective sheets onto the windows to keep out the sun.

"It's absolutely dreadful," said Wilfrid Sammut, an emergency room doctor in Versailles. "You even have cases of illness among the nursing, paramedical, and medical staff because the atmosphere there is unbearable."

Softening resistance

Europe's heat has spurred a wave of demand for air conditioning and softened resistance from authorities. In England, the exhaust hoses of portable air conditioners protruding from windows are an increasingly common sight. A recent report by the U.K.'s Climate Change Committee, a body that advises the government, said that while passive cooling

measures may be sufficient in some places, “the intensity and duration of future heat waves mean that we need to plan for more active cooling.”

London Mayor Sadiq Khan said last week that schools, offices and hospitals should be equipped with the technology.

“We need to use every tool in our cool tool kit to make sure London is ready for the new norm, which is more extreme heat waves,” he said.

Still, the spread of air conditioning invokes a sense of dread among those who fear that the technology will allow Europeans to ignore the consequences of global warming.

“I am horrified by people who say, ‘We only have to put air conditioning everywhere,’” Monique Barbut, France’s climate minister, said last week during the peak of the heat wave. “Do you think that’s going to prevent forest fires? Do you think that’s going to prevent a crop from dying?”

In some European cities, installation of an air conditioner in an apartment requires approval from the entire building. Local officials also get a say, to make sure the system respects architectural norms, noise laws and the city’s energy goals.

In Geneva, the installation of an air conditioner is subject to strict energy-usage rules. London officials have forced homeowners to remove air conditioning because they haven’t resorted to other cooling methods, such as ceiling fans.

“Residents seeking planning permission need to demonstrate that alternative, more climate-friendly measures are not suitable, and that units will not create noise or other harmful impacts on neighbors,” said a spokeswoman for Camden Council, a borough of central London.

In Paris, fights over air conditioning are proliferating as residents increasingly seek to install the systems to ward off the heat. First, residents must gain approval from the neighbors. Then, if the system is visible from the street, local officials can refuse if it mars the iconic, limestone facades of the city’s Haussmannian buildings.

Christophe Sanson, who calls himself the Noise Lawyer, said his firm has more than 100 cases involving air conditioning systems that have provoked legal wars, a sharp increase. Under French law, a building association can block the installation of a system if it produces more than five decibels during the day or three at night, roughly the noise of a light breeze.

“It’s a sound that can penetrate concrete, that is extremely powerful and can be deeply disturbing,” Sanson said. “We need to find a compromise.”

Funaro’s family has been fighting to install air conditioning in his apartment since they purchased it two years ago. Luca has a form of myopathy that has left him mostly paralyzed since birth. His parents purchased his apartment on the ground floor of the building to allow him to live independently.

Through the latest heat wave, the air conditioning system sat unused on the floor awaiting installation.

“The neighbors think I will have it on all day and night nonstop,” he said. “It’s not true, I just want to turn it on for a bit to cool off.”

His mother brought over a mobile air cooler, but the devices often don’t work well against extreme heat.

“Normally it’s one or two days, and then it’s over,” Funaro said. “This time it’s an entire week.”

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