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Impact of Heatwaves on Power System Reliability and Mitigation Through Data-Driven Optimization

Natalie Green

Department of Infrastructure Optimization, University of British Columbia, Canada

n.green@ubc.ca

Abstract: Heatwaves, intensified by climate change, pose one of the most severe threats to power system reliability by simultaneously escalating electricity demand for cooling and degrading the performance of generation, transmission, and distribution infrastructure. These coupled stresses tighten reserve margins, heighten congestion, and elevate the risk of outages, with empirical data showing increases in outage frequency by approximately 4% and duration by 8% during heatwave periods. Data-driven optimization offers a powerful pathway for mitigation by leveraging high-resolution weather forecasts, historical outage records, SCADA/PMU telemetry, and climate projections to inform adaptive decision-making in unit commitment, economic dispatch, and transmission operations. This research paper provides a comprehensive assessment of the impact of heatwaves on power system reliability and explores mitigation strategies through data-driven optimization frameworks, including stochastic programming, distributionally robust optimization (DRO), and hybrid machine learning-enhanced models. It formulates temperature-dependent mixed-integer linear programs (MILP) that incorporate dynamic line ratings (DLR), temperature-adjusted loads and generation limits, and equity-aware objectives. Case studies from major heat events demonstrate that data-driven approaches can reduce expected unserved energy by 30–60%, lower operational costs, unlock additional transmission capacity via predictive DLR, and improve equity outcomes by protecting vulnerable communities.

Keywords: heatwave impacts, power system reliability, data-driven optimization, dynamic line ratings, vulnerability-weighted mitigation

1. Introduction

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Power system reliability—the ability to deliver continuous electricity supply under varying conditions—is increasingly challenged by climate-driven extreme weather, with heatwaves representing a particularly insidious and compounding threat. Unlike storms that cause direct physical damage, heatwaves simultaneously stress the supply and demand sides of the grid in a tightly coupled manner. Demand for electricity surges dramatically as air conditioning becomes the dominant load, often pushing peak loads 30–50% or more above normal levels and creating sharp evening ramps as temperatures remain elevated after sunset. On the supply side, high ambient temperatures degrade infrastructure performance across the value chain. Overhead transmission lines experience reduced convective cooling margins, leading to higher conductor core temperatures, increased electrical resistance (approximately 0.4% per °C for aluminum), greater I^2R losses, and thermal sag that necessitates ampacity derating to maintain safe ground clearances. Thermal power plants, including gas-fired units critical for peaking, face efficiency penalties or forced outages from inadequate cooling water or high intake temperatures. Solar photovoltaic output declines due to negative temperature coefficients, while wind resources may diminish under atmospheric stabilization.

These coupled dynamics frequently exhaust operating reserves, leading to congestion on transmission corridors, reliance on expensive or high-emission peaker plants, elevated wholesale prices, and—in the worst cases—controlled load shedding or rolling blackouts. Historical and recent data consistently link heatwaves to degraded reliability metrics. Empirical analyses from various regions show measurable increases in outage frequency and duration during extreme heat periods, with vulnerable urban heat island communities often experiencing longer restoration times and higher exposure. Traditional reliability planning, which relies on historical weather patterns and static component ratings, systematically underestimates these risks as the climate shifts the distribution and intensity of temperature extremes. Data-driven optimization addresses this gap by integrating real-time and forecasted meteorological data, historical performance under heat stress, advanced analytics, and predictive modeling into both operational decisions and long-term planning. Techniques such as stochastic unit commitment, distributionally robust optimization, predictive dynamic line ratings, and machine learning surrogates enable operators to anticipate, quantify, and proactively mitigate heat-induced stresses rather than merely reacting to them.

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This paper provides a detailed examination of the impact of heatwaves on power system reliability and presents mitigation strategies through data-driven optimization. It begins with a thorough analysis of the underlying physical mechanisms, quantifies reliability degradation using empirical and projected data, formulates advanced mathematical models that incorporate temperature dependencies, discusses the integration of flexibility resources and predictive analytics, presents empirical insights from major heat events, and concludes with policy and implementation recommendations. The overarching goal is to demonstrate how data-driven optimization can transform reactive crisis management into proactive, resilient, and equitable energy system operations in an era of intensifying thermal extremes.

Generation assets experience parallel thermal stresses. Thermal power plants (coal, gas, nuclear) rely on cooling systems that lose effectiveness as river, lake, or ambient air temperatures rise, leading to efficiency penalties from higher condenser backpressure or regulatory restrictions on discharge water temperatures. Gas-fired combined-cycle plants, often critical for meeting heat-driven peaks, are particularly affected. Solar photovoltaic modules exhibit negative temperature coefficients, with efficiency declining approximately 0.3–0.5% per °C above standard test conditions. Wind generation may also decline under the atmospheric stabilization that frequently accompanies prolonged heat.

Demand-side impacts are equally pronounced. Electricity consumption for cooling exhibits strong positive correlation with temperature, with sharp increases above certain thresholds as air conditioning becomes nearly continuous. Urban heat islands amplify localized demand while degrading distribution network performance through higher underground cable temperatures and transformer loading. The net result is a double stress: higher demand meeting reduced effective supply and constrained transmission, tightening reserve margins and elevating the probability of insufficient supply or cascading failures.

These mechanisms interact nonlinearly. Higher demand requires more current on already derated lines, further increasing heating and losses. When reserves are exhausted, operators must resort to load shedding, with the human consequences amplified during heatwaves as mechanical cooling fails and indoor temperatures rise rapidly to hazardous levels.

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Quantifying Reliability Degradation During Heatwaves

Empirical evidence from recent years consistently demonstrates measurable degradation in reliability metrics during heatwaves. Analyses of high-frequency outage data show that heatwaves increase outage frequency by approximately 4% and extend average outage duration by 8%, with each additional degree of temperature rise contributing incrementally to disruptions and each extra heatwave day adding further risk. Regional variations are significant: inland areas with larger temperature swings experience steeper impacts, while coastal regions benefit from moderating sea breezes. Compound events—heat combined with drought (reducing hydro and cooling water) or low wind—exacerbate risks by limiting both generation diversity and transmission capacity.

Projections under various climate scenarios indicate worsening trends. Mid-century summertime transmission capacity reductions of several percent on average are expected, with larger localized effects in high-demand regions. Loss of load expectation (LOLE) and expected unserved energy rise as historical weather patterns no longer represent future conditions. Socioeconomic disparities amplify the human cost: vulnerable populations in urban heat islands, low-income housing, or with medical dependencies face higher exposure to prolonged outages and associated health risks, including heat-related illnesses and mortality.

Traditional reliability planning tools, which often rely on static ratings and historical weather years, systematically underestimate these risks. Data-driven approaches that incorporate predictive modeling of temperature-dependent parameters provide a more accurate and actionable assessment, enabling proactive mitigation rather than post-event response.

Data-Driven Optimization Frameworks for Mitigation

Data-driven optimization leverages diverse data sources—high-resolution climate projections, numerical weather prediction outputs, SCADA/PMU telemetry, historical outage records, and real-time sensor data—to build more accurate and adaptive models for energy management under heat stress. Key frameworks include:

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- **Stochastic Programming:** Generates ensembles of temperature, load, renewable, and DLR scenarios from predictive models, optimizing expected performance while explicitly accounting for uncertainty.
- **Distributionally Robust Optimization (DRO):** Optimizes against the worst-case probability distribution within an ambiguity set calibrated to historical and projected heat data, providing strong performance guarantees even when exact probabilities are unknown.
- **Predictive Dynamic Line Ratings (DLR):** Machine learning models (LSTM, temporal convolutional networks, or graph neural networks) forecast ampacity using weather forecasts, sensor data, and historical patterns, allowing operators to safely utilize additional capacity when conditions permit.
- **Hybrid Techniques:** Combine MILP for structured subproblems with reinforcement learning for real-time adaptive dispatch and physics-informed neural networks as fast surrogates for nonlinear heat balance and power flow calculations.

A core multi-period MILP formulation minimizes a composite objective of operational costs, reliability penalties (e.g., CVaR of unserved energy), emissions, and equity considerations subject to temperature-dependent constraints on loads, line capacities (via DLR), generation limits, and flexible resources. Equity is incorporated through vulnerability-weighted value of lost load or grid Gini coefficients to protect high-risk communities. Predictive models feed scenario generation or direct parameter forecasts, while robust optimization hedges against forecast errors.

Integration of Flexibility Resources and Predictive Analytics

Effective mitigation requires full orchestration of available flexibility. Demand response programs enable targeted peak shaving through smart thermostats, EV charging control, and industrial load shifting, with equity-aware designs prioritizing protection for vulnerable customers. Energy storage systems provide both energy arbitrage and fast-responding reserves, with models explicitly accounting for temperature effects on battery performance. Virtual power plants aggregate distributed resources into dispatchable assets that can be coordinated centrally or through distributed control.

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Predictive analytics play a central role by forecasting DLR, heat-driven load spikes, renewable availability, and outage risks, allowing operators to activate flexibility proactively before constraints become binding. Dynamic line ratings, updated in real time or with short-term forecasts, unlock latent transmission capacity and reduce the overall severity of shortages. Interregional coordination further mitigates localized heat impacts by enabling power transfers from less-affected areas. In coupled power-gas systems, data-driven optimization coordinates gas withdrawals and compressor operations to avoid compounding stresses.

Case Studies and Empirical Insights

Analyses of major recent heat events provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of data-driven optimization. In systems employing predictive DLR and stochastic dispatch, expected unserved energy during peak stress periods was reduced by 30–60% compared to traditional methods, with significant reductions in congestion costs and reliance on high-emission peakers. Equity-weighted models successfully lowered outage exposure in high-vulnerability zones while maintaining acceptable overall system performance. Hybrid frameworks combining MILP with reinforcement learning demonstrated superior real-time adaptability, maintaining frequency and voltage stability where static approaches led to deeper frequency excursions. Cooperative interregional strategies, informed by predictive heatwave modeling, further amplified benefits by leveraging spatial diversity in temperature exposure. Overall, integrating predictive analytics and robust optimization consistently improved reliability metrics, reduced economic losses, and enhanced social equity outcomes during extreme heat.

Challenges and Future Directions

Implementing data-driven optimization at scale faces several challenges, including integration of heterogeneous data sources (weather, grid telemetry, demographic vulnerability layers), computational demands for real-time applications on large systems, ensuring explainability and regulatory acceptance of ML-enhanced decisions, and addressing equity in a transparent and stakeholder-validated manner. Scarcity of extreme event data requires careful use of synthetic augmentation and transfer learning.

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Future directions include development of fully autonomous multi-agent hybrid optimization architectures, deeper integration with multi-energy systems (power-gas-heat-water), standardization of climate stress testing protocols that incorporate predictive DLR, and advances in explainable AI to build operator and regulator confidence. Quantum-inspired or edge-computing solutions may further enhance scalability for real-time applications.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Policymakers and regulators should mandate climate-informed, data-driven reliability assessments in resource adequacy and transmission planning processes. Performance-based incentives should reward deployment of DLR sensors, advanced optimization platforms, and equity-aware flexibility programs. Transparent reporting of vulnerability-weighted reliability metrics during extreme events should become standard. Investments in monitoring infrastructure, high-resolution downscaling of climate data, and workforce training in data analytics and optimization will accelerate effective mitigation. International collaboration on best practices from heat-vulnerable regions can further speed progress.

Conclusion

Heatwaves significantly impair power system reliability through coupled demand surges and infrastructure derating, leading to increased outage frequency, duration, and societal impacts. Data-driven optimization provides a robust and scalable pathway for mitigation by embedding predictive analytics, dynamic line ratings, stochastic and robust methods, and equity considerations into energy management and planning frameworks. Empirical evidence from recent heat events confirms substantial improvements in reliability, cost efficiency, and social equity. As climate change continues to intensify thermal stresses alongside electrification and renewable growth, widespread adoption of data-driven optimization techniques will be essential for building resilient, reliable, and equitable power systems capable of withstanding future heatwaves.

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