

Detroit fire death toll at 79

Blaze kills six children in Detroit working class neighborhood

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The death of six children in a Detroit house fire on December 27 is the latest in a series of fatal blazes that has driven the 1998 fire death toll in the city to 79, an increase of 22 over last year. Of those killed, half were children. Thirteen children died in December alone.

Six members of the O'Steen family, ages 2-11, died in the December 27 fire. Shameeka (11), Shauniqua (8), Anthony (7), Taniqua (6), Desiree (5) and Ashaunta (2) were trapped upstairs when flames blocked the staircase.

The mother, Fremeeeka O'Steen, was in the hospital at the time, giving birth. Her children were staying with their grandmother, Hanna O'Steen, who escaped the blaze along with two aunts and their 10-year-old sister, Shacoya. One of the aunts, Makeba O'Steen, was hospitalized in serious condition. She was eight months pregnant and lost her unborn child due to injuries she suffered jumping from a second story window.

While the cause of the fire is not yet known, neighbors of the O'Steens were all too familiar with the difficulties the family had to confront on a daily basis. Three families were living in a house built as a two-family dwelling. While in the hospital, the mother had to entrust the care of her children to their grandmother and aunts.

Many of the houses in the area date back to 1920s. Some of the homes have not been updated to meet modern safety standards and have hazards such as boiler furnaces with pipes wrapped in asbestos and lead paint on the walls. The O'Steen house had a crawl space with heating ducts between the floorboards and the ground. The back stairs did not reach the second floor level. One inside staircase was blocked because it was being used as a storage area.

The two bedrooms on the first floor were tiny, too small for a single adult, no bigger than 8 feet by 8 feet.

As a consequence, the children were forced to sleep upstairs.

The area is dotted with derelict buildings and vacant lots. Three vacant lots separated the O'Steen house from the corner. Streets in the neighborhood are full of potholes.

The neighborhood is regularly hit by power outages and damaged by severe thunderstorms. Less than 50 yards away from the O'Steen house lay a large tree trunk, at least three feet in diameter, still lying on the ground after being shattered by a storm last summer.

Less than a mile and a half from the neighborhood are the sites of the former Fleetwood and Fischer Body plants, closed by General Motors as part of a wave of shutdowns in the 1980s.

The deaths of the six O'Steen children are only the latest in a series of fatal fires in the Detroit area.

The death of the O'Steen children was a shocking event and evoked an outpouring of sympathy from Detroit residents. Hundreds of workers donated clothing and money to help the family in the wake of the fire. Many have stopped by the charred remains of the home to leave cards and stuffed animals as a memorial to the children.

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the neighborhood where the fire took place on the day following the tragedy. Jonathan Alls, a resident of the neighborhood for 30 years, told the WSWWS, "Not enough is being done for the people that live here. Things like this keep happening. Just about a month ago there was another fire, but luckily no one died."

"When I was growing up this was a wonderful place to live. You had block after block of well-kept, clean and beautiful homes. Today, you watch as the neighborhood and the people who live there die a slow death. It happened after the big layoffs took place in the

1980s. Two General Motors factories were closed right in this neighborhood. Those who lost their jobs became depressed and many turned to drugs and alcohol.

“While you hear talk about things being done for the displaced worker, it certainly isn’t happening in this neighborhood. There is not one rehabilitation center or serious program to help those who have problems. As far as I’m concerned, [Detroit Mayor] Dennis Archer does not represent the people who live here.”

Ms. Davis, who lived across the street from the O’Steens, said, “What is happening to people today is terrible. How are we supposed to survive? People do not have enough money to pay basic utilities, buy food and survive. It is a shame. The government needs to set up a special fund that can assist people.

“Children are dying for no reason. Innocent and precious little kids are perishing. When you look at the state of the house, it is a miracle that anyone survived the fire. We read about and see tragedies taking place on the news, but when it hits close to home, it really, really hurts.”

One mother, Christine, who has six children close in age to the O’Steen children, traveled from the east side of Detroit to express her sympathy. “I work at the fire department and can tell you they do not have enough firefighters. How can they possibly do the job when you have four- to six-man crews?

“I do not agree with the way this is being reported in the news. Why do they have to wait until people die before releasing important information? Today we are being told that smoke detectors are available to those who need them. While this has always been the case, the public doesn’t know about it.”



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