

US: Five children killed in Philadelphia house fire

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Five small children perished Sunday morning in a blaze that swept through their Philadelphia row house at 2870 Amber Street. The victims ranged in age from six months to six years. Their mother Shannon Bowers survived by jumping from a second floor window into a small wading pool that had just been installed in front of the house for the children. She remains in critical condition in nearby Temple Hospital. Her partner Lester Cooke, who also jumped to escape the fire, was treated there and released.

Neighbors identified three of the victims as Summer Bowers, age six, and her sisters, Samantha, age four, and Sabrina, age 2. Also among the dead were an infant cousin and his sister, as yet unidentified, who were visiting for the weekend.

The first of four calls to the emergency 911 number came in at 7:55 am. The first responders arrived to find heavy smoke billowing from both floors. They immediately ordered ladders to perform rescues, but security bars on the windows hampered their efforts. Three of the children were found in a second-floor bedroom, one in a front bedroom on the second floor, and the other in the front room on the first floor.

The fire was extinguished within 11 minutes, but the children were already dead by the time they could be reached. Investigators have yet to determine the exact cause of the fire. It was not clear if the home contained a working smoke detector.

Neighbors said that Bowers had grown up on Amber Street only two doors away. She and Cooke had moved in to the house a year ago and had done extensive work on the premises. Neighbor Stacy Thoroughgood told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "They were just good people. She was nice. He was nice. Never no problems." Others described the children as talkative and energetic.

Cooke not only took care of the three Bowers girls, he often baby-sat for other families on the block of well-tended brick and stucco houses.

This tragedy is only the latest in a string of house fires that have cost the lives of children in working class neighborhoods across the country. Whatever the specific cause of each fire, the conditions of life facing workers and their families underlie these disasters.

Less than a month before, on May 14, four children aged between four and eight years old died from extensive burns in the adjacent Port Richmond district of Philadelphia. Their 26-year-old mother and her remaining child suffered severe burns. The cause of this fire also was not immediately determined.

The Philly Fire News, which keeps track of major fires, reports that there have already been 18 serious dwelling fires in Philadelphia and its environs in the month of June.

House fire fatalities are not just a problem in Philadelphia. They rarely make headlines unless there is a substantial loss of life, and even then, news items are usually limited to a paragraph or two confined to the local news pages and television broadcasts. Yet they are symptomatic of the poverty, crowded housing and the stresses of everyday life with which working class families must contend.

At the end of May, a fire in a 99-year-old home in a low-income section of Cleveland, Ohio took the life of Media Carter, her 34-year-old sister Sheria, and seven children who were between the ages of seven and 15. The mother was well known in the neighborhood for welcoming her children's friends into her house. That night, a number had been invited to sleep over. The fire broke out at three in the morning. The bodies were all found on the heavily damaged second floor.

Other fatal fires took place around the country late last month. On May 29, two girls in Silverdale, Washington, aged five and eight, couldn't make it out in time after their father summoned firefighters at 5am. No working smoke detectors were found in the home.

The next night, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, three

top floor residents were killed in a fast-moving fire that broke out in a multi-family house in the city's South End. Officials reported that battery-operated smoke detectors on the second floor, where the fire broke out, didn't work.

A study published in 2003 by the University of Villanova examined 246 fire deaths in the Philadelphia area over the 11-year period from 1989 to 2000. Death rates from fire were higher than those for motor vehicle accidents for children under age ten. Countrywide, fire and burns are the leading cause of death in the home for children.

The researchers analyzed census data by district based on variables including age of housing, number of single-parent households, income, level of education, ability to speak English, access to a telephone, unemployment rate, the ratio of children to adults, and the population under age 15.

Commenting on child deaths in a fire, the authors state, "In urban areas such as Philadelphia, arson deaths are grounded in family violence and drug dealing, while unintentional fire deaths are grounded in poverty." Due to the pressures of earning a living and taking care of older children, low-income parents often must opt to take a chance on leaving their younger children unsupervised. The authors cite the case of a woman who left her children aged five and three unsupervised while she walked her three slightly older children to school. Within minutes, the youngest had set the couch on fire. Both left at home perished in the ensuing fire.

They also point out that "substandard and unsafe dwellings...are less likely to have fire warning systems and exits," increasing the risk of death in such "marginal environments." They further note an increase in the death rate in winter months, when improper space heaters and wood-burning stoves are used.



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