

# House fire deaths highlight levels of poverty in Australia

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Accidental house fires have killed more than 20 people in Australia so far this winter—predominately in the most disadvantaged city suburbs and in rural areas. During May, June and July, at least 14 people died in the most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), compared to 20 for the entire year of 2004.

House fire fatalities, which studies have shown are strongly linked to poverty and disadvantage, are preventable. Many families and individuals, however, are forced to use faulty or cheap heaters to keep warm in the winter months. Those on the lowest incomes generally live in the oldest, most poorly built, maintained and electrically-wired housing. In extreme cases, families who have had their electricity shut off rely on candles for lighting or use makeshift fires, increasing the risk of accidents.

Media reports of fire deaths this winter have provided little detail about the conditions of the housing or incomes of those who died, let alone probe the general social conditions that allow such tragedies to occur. The media has often attempted to blame the victims, in one case witchhunting the mother of children who died, blaming her for leaving the children home alone.

That blaze, the most tragic and widely reported, occurred near Wyong, on the NSW central coast between Sydney and Newcastle. The three sons of Lisa Forde—Jethro Sparkes, 7, George Gillett, 2, and Harley Wells, 15 months—and their friend Madison Hands, 6, were killed after a fire erupted, reportedly as a result of a pillow or blanket falling on a bar heater. Lisa Forde's two daughters, aged 11 and 13, and a 12-year-old friend, escaped the fire.

After a party with family and friends at home, Forde and her partner had left to celebrate her thirty-sixth birthday at a nearby sports club. The older children were left to baby-sit the others, and another adult friend had reportedly agreed to supervise the children. When the children became aware of the blaze, the four youngest were unable to jump off a second-storey ledge. Emergency services came too late to rescue them.

The family had been through difficult times. Two of the fathers of the children were in prison. As soon as information emerged that the family was disadvantaged and the children died without adult supervision, sections of the media started to

victimise Forde and promote the possibility of criminal charges against her. Police announced they were investigating whether to charge her with child neglect.

Right-wing Melbourne *Herald Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt tried to persecute the mother, not only with claims of neglect, but also for having children to separate fathers. "The deaths of so many children is truly shocking. But what must also disturb is to be reminded again...how some Australians now live, freer to divorce, freer to mate, freer to breed, freer to abandon, freer to idle, freer to neglect."

In other words, Bolt was seeking to blame deteriorating social conditions that lie behind the house fires on poor single mothers and welfare recipients. Despite the efforts of Bolt and others, the witchhunting of Forde received little public sympathy. Donations flowed in for an appeal for Forde's family, and letters to the editor largely sympathised with Forde. The police investigation was apparently not pursued further.

Given that the Wyong blaze was the third fatal house fire in NSW within a single week in June, the attacks on Forde were largely to shift the blame for fires onto the victims. This was doubly so in the Wyong fire because emergency services were accused of being slow to respond and of sending inadequate manpower and vehicles, possibly costing the lives of the children.

Earlier that week, on June 5, Tony and Belinda Conn and their 4-year-old son, Will, died when their weatherboard and fibro farmhouse was burned to the ground near the town of Coonamble, 500 kilometres north-west of Sydney. Tony and Belinda were farmers in a region that has been struggling financially, particularly due to prolonged drought.

Initially the Conns escaped the fire with three of their children, aged 14, 10 and 4. However, both adults perished when they went back into the house in an attempt to save their twin child, Will. The cause of the blaze is still unknown. Donations from the local area and across the state raised over \$100,000 to help support the orphaned children. Farmers have also donated their time and resources to plant a crop and otherwise keep the farm running.

Other reported fatalities this winter include:

\* On July 30, a 78-old-man died in a house blaze in south-west Brisbane in the northern state of Queensland. He managed

to escape the house after the kitchen fire, but then collapsed.

\* On July 2, a man died in the northern NSW town of Armidale when a fire broke out at about 5.30 a.m.

\* On June 27, a two-year-old boy died and his father, Darren Bray, was badly burned when fire erupted in a small demountable caretaker's quarters at Bracalba Council Quarry in Queensland. Bray had acted as a plant operator and caretaker, which involved sleeping at the quarry, and had previously worked for the Brisbane City Council for five years.

\* On June 24, a 29-year-old man died when the house in which he was living in Daisy Hill, Brisbane caught alight. Queensland Fire and Rescue stated that the blaze started from the kitchen.

\* On June 14, a 48-year-old man died when his single-storey brick house caught alight in Preston, Melbourne in the southern state of Victoria.

\* On June 11, Jeff Gilmore, 32, was pulled unconscious from his house in Corrimal, a coastal town south of Sydney, but died from smoke inhalation. Gilmore worked as a part-time computer technician at the University of Wollongong's student association.

\* On June 8, a man in his fifties and a woman in her sixties died of smoke inhalation after a fire in a farm house near the small town of Burruga in central west NSW.

\* On June 5, Phillip Spittle, a man in his mid-fifties, died of smoke inhalation when his timber house in Gordon Vale, north Queensland, caught fire while he was sleeping.

\* Early in the morning of May 29, an elderly man died when his caravan caught fire in Goulburn, in the NSW Southern Highlands.

\* On May 28, 13-year-old Sara Wolfenden died when her friend's house in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, caught fire.

\* At 4 p.m. on May 25, a 3-year-old boy died in a house blaze in the small town of Warren in the central west of NSW. The child's parents and siblings weren't inside the house at the time of the fire. The child's mother tried to break into the house to rescue her son and was badly burned on the hands.

\* On May 12, a man died in a fire in a house garage in the Sydney inner-west suburb of Ashfield.

\* On May 7, Robert Williams, 37, died when his small fibro house was engulfed in flames in the town of Campania in southern state of Tasmania. Emergency services found Williams, who was a transport driver and mechanic in the small town (population 260), in his lounge room. His young daughter was staying with her mother at the time of the fire.

### **Rural towns and poor suburbs**

A large proportion of the deaths occurred on farms or small towns, even though the vast majority of Australians live in large cities. This is not surprising given the decline in the social position of many farmers and those living in regional towns over the past 20 years. Many people in rural areas have been forced into low-paying and casual jobs and live in difficult

economic circumstances. Government services, including fire brigades, have received inadequate funding. Rural fire services depend heavily on volunteers.

NSW Fire Brigades statistics indicate that 10 of the worst 13 local government areas for fire fatalities in that state are rural. The remaining three are largely urban (Campbelltown, Blacktown and Penrith), but cover some of poorest outlying suburbs of Sydney.

Most deaths have occurred in the relatively warm states of NSW and Queensland, where one would expect less use of heating. For example, Sydney and Brisbane's average minimum temperature in July is 8.6 (47.4 F) and 9.5 degrees Celsius respectively, compared to 6.8 and -0.1 for Melbourne and Canberra. This pattern may indicate that heating is normally less of a priority in warmer regions and people resort to cheap heating during the relatively fewer cold nights. The figures may also reflect the extreme poverty found, particularly in rural areas, in both NSW and Queensland.

In response to public criticism, the NSW Labor government introduced legislation in June to make fire alarms mandatory in all dwellings by May 1, 2006. Those who do not comply could be fined \$550. According to the state government, 88 percent of fire deaths in the decade to 1999-2000 occurred in dwellings with no smoke alarms. In 2004, approximately 73 percent of houses had wired or battery powered smoke alarms, which was up from 28 percent in the early 1990s when alarms became mandatory for new buildings. Emergency Services Minister Tony Kelly also urged insurance companies not to insure houses that lack a working fire alarm.

There is no doubt that alarms reduce the risk of deaths. However, these changes do not address the underlying social causes of the fires. Many families and individuals are struggling financially. Buying and installing a decent alarm may mean foregoing paying a telephone bill or not changing bald tyres on a car.

The legislation places the burden for preventing fires on individuals and none of the burden on the government. Given the record of the NSW Labor government, the laws are also likely to be used to victimise people who experience a house fire. Those who do not have alarms installed and then lose a house or loved ones due to fire will be accused of breaking the law and blamed for the tragedy. If they have insurance, they may also be refused a payout.



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