

Deadly house fire in Petersburg, Virginia: the human cost of social inequality

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In the early hours of January 12, 2007, an old wood-frame house in Petersburg, Virginia caught fire, killing three boys and injuring seven others. Two sisters, Diamond and Hope Hazer, were renting the house, and their extended family was living in it. Six-year-old Mark Banks, 11-year-old Na'Tyah Hazer and 16-year-old John Harper Jr. were unable to escape the fire.

As with so many house fires in the United States, the likely cause of the blaze was the space heaters or candles used by families to heat and light their homes after electricity and gas service had been cut off. Each winter in the US hundreds perish in such fires, whose root cause is desperate poverty and the subordination of social needs to the profits of the energy companies. Such a tragedy, occurring in a small Southern city of only 30,479, provides an insight into the conditions of life facing millions of people in cities and towns across the country.

The Hazer household's smoke detectors did not work, and the fire burned for about an hour before the husband of one of the sisters awoke. He found that the fire had charred a room, and shouted to get everyone out of the house. Some were stuck on the second floor; a 14-year-old boy jumped from the second-floor porch after failing to reach the younger boys, and 13-year-old Yorel Hazer was forced to do the same, holding and protecting her six-month-old brother Damien and breaking her own shoulder in the fall. Diamond Hazer suffered from severe burns to the face, arms and legs from trying to save the children. All of those who survived were taken to a hospital in Richmond, and have since been released.

A duplex house next door was caught in the raging fire, even though a six-foot-wide gravel driveway separated the two homes. The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Minnie Cole, who lives in the portion of the house next door affected by the fire. "We were asleep, in the middle of night, and at about 2 a.m. my granddaughter saw the flames, thank God," she said. "When we got outside, the fire was already blazing on the banister. I had to run down to the other end of the porch to get by, and then I rolled around on the ground (to put out the fire) and ran."

Minnie's sister Elaine noted that kerosene heaters and candles were used in the Hazer house since the electricity and gas were cut off. The house is one of a dozen owned in Petersburg by Donatus Amaram, a marketing and management professor at nearby Virginia State University. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reports that he was not aware that the electricity and gas had been cut off, though the sisters were behind in rent. He made a request to the police to evict the families, but withdrew it because Diamond Hazer had her baby Damien and had no other place to live.

Utility companies, privatized and deregulated, will cut off services for unpaid bills, regardless of the dire situation it creates, including for families with young children. Minnie Cole commented on Dominion Power, the region's sole power provider: "They just don't know how some people can't survive. Dominion needs to help the people who haven't got the money instead of cutting off the electricity when the bill

isn't paid. Dominion will send you a \$400 light bill, and you're only getting \$200 a week and you've got children. Dominion Power just doesn't care. Just like the gas people."

None of the commentary on the fire in local newspapers mentioned the role of the utility company, but instead attributed the source of the problem solely to a lack of smoke detectors. One cited a comment by Kathy Grestner, a program specialist with the US Fire Administration. "Having a smoke alarm in a house gives some warning. About half of all fatal fires occur in homes with no or non-working smoke alarms." She then added a statement that indicates a deeper cause—most fatal house fires also occur in winter. In 2005 in the US, 3,675 died in house fires while another 17,925 were injured.

Elaine noted, "A few weeks ago down the street there was a fire on a Friday, and then the next day there was another one. Every winter there's fires ... the houses are so old, it doesn't take much to burn them." In June of 2005, on the same block, one of seven residents in an aging frame house was killed in a fire. The following November another died in Battersea, another impoverished area of Petersburg with old wooden homes and high vacancy rates. Since 2000, there have been nine deaths and 119 injuries from fires in Petersburg.

The underlying housing conditions that give rise to such tragedies are plain to see in Petersburg. To the left of the Hazer house is the previously mentioned duplex, now with charred upper rooms, a heavily damaged roof, and a badly burned side. To the right is another old frame house, now in the process of being boarded up, as it has been vacant for months. Directly across the street a house is already boarded up, as is the next house to its right. To the left of these another old wooden house is still occupied.

Most of the inner residential areas of Petersburg look like this, with original residences still standing. They tend to be of small to medium size, with wooden construction—frames, siding, windows and porches. Few have been improved with more modern housing materials. A noticeably high number of these houses are abandoned and boarded up, and many also have large gaps between them owing to the demolition of other housing. As of 2000, when the last census was taken, Petersburg had 16,955 houses, and 2,156, or nearly 14 percent of them, were vacant. [1] These vacant houses are concentrated in the innermost and oldest areas of the town, with somewhat newer housing built on its outskirts.

Average home values are also low: 23.5 percent of housing is worth \$50,000 or less, and a further 61.6 percent is valued between \$50,000 and \$99,000. The median value of a house in Petersburg at the time of the 2000 census was just \$68,600, while in adjacent Chesterfield County the median was \$120,500. That county has seen large growth fueled by management, financial and research jobs in the nearby city of Richmond; in 2002 there were 3,319 building permits for housing units there. The same year in Petersburg, there were just eight—even though most housing was built decades, or even a century, ago.[2]

The deteriorating character of the housing stock in Petersburg, however,

does not make it affordable for many in the city: 30 percent of residents are paying 35 percent or more of their income towards rent, and 21 percent are paying that much or more towards mortgages. [1] The Hazer family could not even afford rent or utilities. A sub-landlord reportedly was charging them \$100 per room per week.

Petersburg had a poverty rate of 18.5 percent in 2003, a figure that vastly underestimates the scale of poverty, given that the official poverty line is far lower than what is required for basic necessities. A Petersburg *Progress-Index* article on energy bill assistance carried a comment by Kim Robertson of the local American Red Cross: “We get a lot of calls [for energy assistance]. It’s constant. To me, it seems like a continuing thing.” According to the National Fuel Funds Network, an estimated 30 million families qualify for energy assistance nationwide, but only 6.2 million received it in 2006.

Over 30 percent of those living in Petersburg do not have a high school diploma, which is an essential requirement for jobs offering anything more than the lowest wages. A statewide school testing program, Standards of Learning, is used at all public schools to determine effectiveness. While it is a stressful and crude gauge of the amount children are learning, it is notable that only one of Petersburg’s nine schools was able to pass and gain accreditation. In response, a private consulting firm was hired to do an “efficiency review” in the school district. The review focuses not on the quality of education, but the cost. Its proposals could save the district \$19 million over the next five years, through a reduction of staff, including middle and high school teachers.

Downtown Petersburg offers little in the way of recreation or culture. Along the main commercial street, many businesses are empty, boarded up, or dormant, while what remains closes early. There is no movie theater in the center of town, with the closest one a few miles away on a major highway. Gas Stations, car dealerships and convenience stores radiate around the city center. Along a few miles of US 301, which passes through the town, there are 14 check cashing stores, four payday loan stores, and four pawnshops.

The last census reported that 20 percent of households have no car, and 40 percent have only one. [1] For local service, Petersburg operates a bus system between 6:30 in the morning and 5:30 at night, Monday through Saturday, with shutdowns for 11 holidays. Residents complain bitterly about the insufficient public transit, which ends just as those working normal hours—9 a.m. to 5 p.m.—would get off work. For those working overtime, overnight, weekends or holidays, there is no service.

Private bus carriers and the national passenger rail system, Amtrak, operate through Petersburg with limited service. After decades of cutbacks, the latter only operates trains through the city north and south, with nearby cities to the west and east only available by way of circuitous and time-consuming routes. While highway transport is prominent, with three major interstates converging in the area, many of the region’s jobs are based near these roads, making it difficult for those without a car to reach them.

Petersburg is known for its role in the Civil War, as it was a strategic gateway to Richmond, Virginia, which the Union Army sought to cut off with a 292-day siege. It is located on the Appomattox River just before mountain topography makes it unnavigable, making it an important trading point and causing three railroads to converge in and around the city. With this infrastructure Petersburg developed a large industrial base, particularly for the South.

During the ascendancy of American industrial power, Petersburg was also known for its small industry, including such companies as Virginia Carolina Chemical, Petersburg Gas Company and the Columbian Peanut Company. Cigarette, luggage and pen manufacturing existed on a larger scale, and Seward Trunk Company was the largest producer of trunks and luggage domestically.

Nearly all of these factories and warehouses have moved elsewhere or

have closed down. The port of Petersburg is no more, along with an entire railroad line running through the city. When asked about the prospects for work in Petersburg, Minnie Cole replied, “My husband worked at Brown & Williamson (tobacco company) for 17 years, and hasn’t found a thing since they left.”

In the Battersea area, where a deadly house fire occurred in 2005, Brown & Williamson formerly had tobacco warehouses with nearly 40 buildings employing over 4,000. Seward Trunk Company also had another complex within the city, occupying two city blocks, which is now being developed into high-end apartments and condominiums that are supposed to bring to Petersburg, according to the city’s newspaper, “ambitious professionals with a pioneering spirit.”

This effort to restore “Old Towne Petersburg” is relentlessly promoted by the local establishment, but it is overwhelmed by the deteriorating conditions of the city as a whole. A few old houses and mansions have been restored beautifully, but hundreds of other houses in desperate need of rebuilding or replacement remain as the only affordable option for much of the population. The commercial areas under preservation see little activity as they are trying to cater to a better-heeled market that hardly exists in Petersburg. One block has multiple antique stores within view of each other, interspersed with a few restaurants, galleries, and a boutique—such is the revitalization of the “old towne.”

The conditions of the working class of Petersburg have suffered a steady erosion as part of a much larger trend. Thousands have left: the population of the city in 2006 was 30,479, a loss of 3,261 people since the year 2000. [3] The largest employer in the area is the military, with over 3,000 troops stationed at nearby Fort Lee. Otherwise, the largest regional employers are Walmart, Ukrops Supermarkets, Food Lion Supermarkets, J.C. Penny, and Kmart department stores, companies paying low wages to most of the 7,000 workers they employ.

The region as a whole—which consists of Petersburg, Richmond, the industrial city of Hopewell, and Chesterfield county between the three—is growing economically. Some corporations have moved to the region, including a number of multinational companies. Service Center Metals recently opened a facility in the area, and is touted as a success story by the region’s Economic Development Organization. The company cited as one of the area’s selling points the fact that Virginia is a “right-to-work state with low unionization levels.” It also boasted that at a job fair it received “500 applicants for the initial 30 job openings” [4]

What economic growth there is in the region is founded on the low corporate taxes, low wages and strategic location of the area. This growth, however, is fickle: a Startek call center opened in 2006 to great fanfare as it became one Petersburg’s largest employers, but after just a year it is closing, shedding 300 jobs. The increasingly global character of the region’s employers will ensure such instability, as corporations shift constantly in search of profits.

It is the profit system that has created the dismal conditions in Petersburg and that is ultimately responsible for the fire that claimed three young lives in the Hazer family. The dilemma confronting them—their inability to afford the social necessities of housing, food and utilities—is common to millions of families across America.

Teetering on the brink of homelessness, the choice is between a place to live, food, or whether to have electricity and heat in the middle of winter. These grinding problems of daily life can be suddenly exacerbated by tragedy—a health crisis, the loss of a job, or a fire such as this one. Now without a home, the Hazer family is relying on relatives and friends. Meanwhile, the cause of such tragedies persists—the intensifying social inequality that pervades American life.

Notes:

1. <http://petersburg.areaconnect.com/statistics.htm>
2. <http://www.gatewayregion.com/datacenter/>
3. <http://www.coopercenter.org/demographics/POPULATION%20ESTIM>

ATES/

4. <http://www.gatewayregion.com/siteselection/regions/working-class.htm>



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