

# Poverty, dilapidated housing behind rash of deadly fires in US cities

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26 May 2007

Fatal house fires occurred this week in Baltimore, Maryland, and Detroit and Saginaw in Michigan. The three fires claimed a total of 16 lives, including 13 children.

All three tragedies shared common features. The victims were poor and lived in neighborhoods that have suffered years of economic decline.

A kitchen fire engulfed a house in Saginaw in the early morning hours of May 24, killing five children and their 36-year-old stepfather, who died after running back into the burning home in an effort to save the youngsters. The children's mother was trapped by flames in the basement and only survived because sheriff's deputies were able to pull her to safety.

According to a local news account, Samuel Watkins ran out of the burning house and flagged down the deputies, who were nearby. Watkins then reentered the home, running "back through a wall of flames and smoke to go upstairs" to try to save his wife, Tanesha Watkins, 33, and his five stepchildren, police detective Jason Ball said.

Along with her husband, Tanesha Watkins lost all of her children: Adam Dupuis, 13; Majesty Price, 8; Destiny Price, 5; Essence Price, 3; and Chad Skinner, 1.

The young couple were married about two months ago and were trying to raise their family on wages earned at the local Wal-Mart, where Samuel was a cashier and Tanesha manned the service desk. Co-workers at Wal-Mart began selling root beer floats at store entrances Thursday to raise funds for the funeral and other expenses.

Authorities said the family's home was more than a century old and lacked smoke detectors.

Saginaw has been decimated by the loss of manufacturing jobs over the last three decades. Just days after the fire, crews shut down production at General Motors' Saginaw Malleable Iron foundry, which once employed 3,000 workers. The foundry is one of several plants that have been mothballed in what was once a major industrial center.

The city's population has fallen from 100,000 in 1960 to around 60,000, and 28.5 percent of Saginaw residents live below the official poverty line, including 40.2 percent of

those under age 18.

The Saginaw fire followed the deaths of a 27-year-old pregnant woman and her three children—ages seven, five, and three—who were killed on May 21 in a house fire in southwest Detroit. Neighbors say the mother and father, a machine operator named David Soto, had emigrated from Guadalajara, Mexico and lived in the aging wood-framed house for the past three years.

Authorities believe a barbecue grill may have sparked the fire. Like many houses in the neighborhood, the Soto's home had no working smoke detectors. The house is located in a working class area that is home to many Latino immigrants. It too has been hit by the downsizing of the auto industry, including the 1987 shutdown of two nearby GM factories—the Fleetwood Body and Cadillac Assembly plants, which once employed a total of 8,000 workers.

Detroit is the poorest big city in America, with a third of its population and half of its children living in poverty. The median household income in Wayne County, which includes Detroit, has fallen by 10 percent since 2000, as the Motor City has continued to lose jobs and the city's economy has become increasingly dependent on downtown casinos rather than auto plants.

The financial meltdown of the city has led to years of cutbacks in fire and rescue services, prompting both the firefighters' union and the fire department to warn that cost-savings had put public safety at risk.

On Tuesday morning, May 22, six people were killed and seven others badly hurt in one of the deadliest fires in Baltimore's history. The tragedy took place on the city's east side, near Green Mount Cemetery, in a rented row house. According to local reports, the single-family house was packed with an extended family, whom the owner had tried to evict a month ago.

Among the victims were a mother and a child who used a wheelchair, relatives and cousins, and possibly friends. Several people jumped from second-floor windows to escape the blaze. Fire officials said the bodies of the dead were burned beyond recognition and identifying them would be

difficult.

“The scene inside that house is something no one should have to see,” Fire Chief William J. Goodwin Jr. told the *Baltimore Sun*. “And no one should have to die that way.”

Among the dead were William Hyman and Tayshawn Thomas, 16, who used a wheelchair; Davontae Witherspoon, 13; and Nijuan Thomas Jr., 3.

Neighbors and local housing advocates say the doubling and tripling up of families in dilapidated, single-family residences is common in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. “It has nothing to do with trying to violate any city codes. It’s just out of necessity,” said the Rev. James L. Carter, pastor of the nearby Ark Church, where a vigil for the victims was held Tuesday night. “We’re living in some hard times,” he told the Associated Press.

The neighborhood where the fire occurred—East Baltimore-Midway—is northeast of downtown, within a mile of Johns Hopkins University. According to Census data, the neighborhood’s population declined by 23 percent—more than 1,200 residents—between 1990 and 2000. More than 96 percent of the community’s residents are black.

Median household income in the area was reported to be \$27,824, and more than 30 percent of families with children under 18 were living in poverty. That figure jumped to nearly 43 percent for families with children under five. Nearly half of single mothers with children under five were living in poverty.

“The argument that some people give is that there’s plenty of affordable housing in Baltimore,” housing advocate Stuart Katzenberg told the Associated Press. “Well, I guess—if you want a shell of a property where the floors are rotting away and it’s a tinderbox.”

According to a 2005 report funded by the Abell Foundation, the city has about 40,000 low-income renters “who cannot afford even the modest rents on their dwellings, live in substandard housing, or both.” The report also found that more than one-third of the rental units in the city “do not meet basic housing codes of physical adequacy.”

The Associated Press article noted: “Like many disadvantaged communities in Baltimore, East Baltimore-Midway is not far from more prosperous environs. Walk seven blocks west on North Avenue, then turn south on Calvert Street, and you’ll find the Station North Townhomes—gleaming new \$400,000 structures meant to attract professionals who commute by train to Washington from nearby Penn Station, among others.”

Like Saginaw and Detroit, Baltimore, once a major steel-making center and seaport, has become a “rust-belt” city, with the major employer no longer Bethlehem Steel or the docks, but Johns Hopkins University. Gentrification and the

deliberate destruction of public housing to rid areas of the poor have pushed up homeless rolls while condemning others to live in unsafe firetraps.

In its coverage of these fires, the news media largely ignore the conditions of poverty that underlie the tragic loss of life and even suggest that the victims themselves are to blame, invariably pointing to missing or non-functioning smoke detectors and other hazards. The one article that pointed out the obvious, the above-cited Associated Press story, which was headlined “Fatal Fire Illustrates Struggles of Baltimore’s Urban Poor,” was largely ignored by the news media.

There is data on the connection between poverty and house fires, including a study conducted in 2001 by Dr. Gregory Istre, an epidemiologist at the Injury Prevention Center of Dallas. Dr. Istre looked at injuries from house fires that occurred in the city from 1991 to 1997.

His study found that census tracts with low median incomes had injury rates eight times as high as those with high median incomes. Injuries were 6.6 times more common from fires in houses built before 1980 than from fires in more recently built houses.

The study estimated that, overall, the rate of fire-related injuries in houses without a functioning smoke detector was 8.7 times that of houses with a functioning smoke detector. It also found that houses in census tracts with the lowest median family income had the lowest proportion of functioning smoke alarms.

Millions of working and poor people in America lack decent and safe housing. Meanwhile, the stock market hits record levels, financiers and corporate executives pocket staggering sums, and hundreds of billions are squandered on war.



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