

# Deadly fire kills five children in Pittsburgh home

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Early Tuesday morning, June 12, a deadly fire swept through a three-story home in a poverty-stricken neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, killing five children, aged three to seven.

All of the victims were found on the second floor of the 107-year-old woodframe building. Two of the children were declared dead on the scene and three others were rushed to the nearest hospital, some three miles away. One child was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital and the other two died in the emergency room, explained Stephanie Waite, a hospital spokeswoman.

"I can still hear those children screaming in my head," said Jamar Samuel who rescued two eight-year-olds from the fire. Samuel was attending a candlelight vigil for the victims of the fire when he spoke to the WSW of the tragedy.

"I was visiting with some friends down the street," said Samuel, "when I realized the house was on fire. I ran over and got the two kids out, but when I tried to get to the others the ceiling over the stairs was falling down.

"I have kids of my own, and I just keep hearing them screaming for help."

The dead children were identified as Dezekiah Holyfield, 3; Cedano Holyfield, 4; Daekia Holyfield, 7; Azquel Rankin, 5; and Andre Rankin, 6. The five children were from two different families. Three of the children—Dezekiah, Cedano and Daekia, along with their mother, 25-year-old Shakita Marie Mangham—lived in the home. Azquel and André, who lived nearby, had been dropped off by their mother, 25-year-old Furrah Love, the evening before. The two eight-year-old boys who survived the fire are Huedon Chambliss and Jevon Irwin, one from each family.

The deadly fire broke out at 1:20 a.m. Many neighbors and 911 records confirm the speed with which it consumed the century-old home. Fire officials believe it was caused by the children playing with matches.

The first 911 call was placed at 1:23 a.m., and police responded within one minute. Firefighters were reported to have responded in four minutes. Neither force, however, was able to save the screaming children.

According to Pittsburgh Fire Chief Mike Huss, flames were shooting from all three floors of the old woodframe building when the firefighters arrived. The fire also spread to houses on either side, one of which was vacant and badly damaged from the flames.

"Our firefighters, they're hurting today because they didn't have a chance to make that rescue," Huss said. "It's very difficult. We take these types of tragedies personally. We're frustrated we couldn't get in to save those children."

"They seemed like real nice children," said Willie Mae Murphy, who lives a few houses down from the fire. "One of them seemed like she was grown, the way she could take care of the younger ones, better than I could. This is a real tragedy, everyone feels real sad. I didn't know the mother, I would see her coming and going. She was doing the best she could with what she had."

The seven children had been left in the home by their mothers, who told police they had gone out for the evening and left the children with a 17-year-old babysitter. The police are presently searching for the babysitter.

As in other cases where house fires have claimed the lives of young children, authorities and the media are looking for a means to make criminals out of the victims rather than to expose the social conditions that underlie these horrible tragedies.

Already, the media has reported that the government is looking into several potential charges in connection with the children's deaths. The first article on the fire, posted on the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* web site, mentioned several times that arson investigators had been called to the scene. Readers were left with the impression that the fire was a criminal act, with the possibility that the parents could have caused it. Only at the very end of the article was it stated that arson investigators are brought in to investigate all fatal fires.

In another report, the police have stated they are looking into whether the children were locked in the second floor bedroom where the five children were found dead. KDKA News reported that the police are investigating whether or not the mothers will be charged for leaving the children alone without adult supervision.

Several articles have focused on the search for the babysitter. An AP story picked up by the television networks was headlined "5 kids die in fire; cops search for babysitter." A *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article carried the headline "Baby-sitter still a mystery in fire that killed five children," and the *New York Times* ran an article—"Police Probe Fire That Killed 5 Kids"—stating that the babysitter may not exist at all.

The police have made clear that they plan to arrest the babysitter if she is found, or if the two mothers are lying about her, the mothers themselves. The police told the media they are waiting for the funerals to take place before they “move forward on their investigation.”

The rush to criminalize parents after tragedies of this nature has served as a convenient diversion from the underlying causes for tragic fire-deaths of this nature: grinding poverty and the destruction of social programs that place working class families in impossible situations.

Ms. Weir, who was also at the candlelight vigil and has a mother living nearby, commented, “There are a lot of people in this type of environment. I saw the children; they played with my grandchild. They were good kids. But there are a lot of young single mothers these days and there need to be government programs to teach them how to raise a family and how to deal with problems. There is some help out there, but most people don’t know how to get it, and when they do, they make them jump through hoops for it.

“You have so many homeless people and so many homes that are vacant. Why can’t the city hire people to remodel these homes and let the homeless live in them, and give them the support they need? The school down the street is closed; it could be used and turned into something for the children.

“But of course all of this takes money and the politicians have money for war, but not for the people in this country.”

While the circumstances surrounding the fire are not yet clear, it is evident that the young mothers faced difficult choices. Affordable childcare does not exist for working class women on a low income. Decent, affordable housing is also out of reach for large sections of the American population.

As poverty levels continue to rise, in Pittsburgh and throughout the country, the government has carried out continuous cuts in social programs, leaving a growing working-poor population on its own to fend for itself. Under these conditions—where poverty is not understood as a social problem, and instead is treated as a personal choice—it is much easier to blame the victims.

### **Social conditions in Pittsburgh and the Lincoln-Larimer neighborhood**

According to the US Census Bureau, nearly one third of all families with single parents and children under 18 in the Lincoln-Larimer area of Pittsburgh live below the poverty level. For black female heads of households, that number increases to 50 percent. Close to a third of such families are living at less than half the official poverty rate.

The Lincoln-Larimer section of Pittsburgh is one of the most impoverished and isolated neighborhoods of the city. On every block, there are numerous boarded-up homes and vacant lots. On the block of the fire, there is at least one vacant home and three vacant lots.

While the city of Pittsburgh has a diverse population, the Lincoln-Larimer neighborhood is one of the most segregated, with an almost all-black population. Of the 350 students in the local primary school, 342 are African-American, 7 are multiracial and there is 1 Hispanic child. There are no white students.

Last year, due to cuts in public education, 230 intermediate age

students were added to Lincoln Elementary School, transforming it into a kindergarten through eighth-grade school, although the middle school students are taught in a different building. All but three of these students are African-American.

Census information shows that 90 percent of the children live in poverty, with many families living in extreme poverty, or on less than half the official poverty rate, which presently stands at a woefully low \$18,850 for a family of four.

The City of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County and the state of Pennsylvania have spent hundreds of millions of dollars building two new sports stadiums and a convention center, and are now in the process of building a new hockey arena. A tunnel is being constructed under the Allegheny River to provide trolley service to the stadiums and a casino that is being built, adding hundreds of millions more to taxpayer bills.

Meanwhile, entire communities such as Lincoln-Larimer have been left isolated and impoverished. There are no recreation centers, swimming pools or senior citizens’ centers in the neighborhood. Driving around, this reporter did not see any playgrounds, a gym or basketball courts. Most of the children played on the sidewalks, streets or the vacant lots. There are no supermarkets or department stores, only a few corner stores. The Veterans Administration hospital has been closed and there are no other city, county, state or federal agencies in the area.

Marcus Stewart, who works at the YWCA in the neighboring Homewood section of the city, visited the house along with more than 50 neighbors and friends Tuesday evening. Marcus spoke to the WSWs about his feelings on the fire deaths.

“I knew the mother who lived here and her kids. Nobody should have to lose their kids, especially this many.

“There is nothing for young people to do. When I was growing up, there were summer job programs and field trips. Now there is nothing. Around here, there is nothing but negative things for the kids to see.”

“The politicians don’t care about us. There should be a football field, baseball field, something for the kids to do. Instead there is nothing but vacant lots and boarded-up homes. The place looks like a junk yard.”



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