

# House fire in Philadelphia kills seven

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An intense house blaze claimed seven lives in a working class neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 26, after a kerosene heater caught fire in a basement residence.

Like so many other recent fires, Friday's tragedy was, to a large extent, a product of the poverty and social distress experienced by millions of the urban poor in the US. Faced with high utility prices, worsening economic prospects and often decrepit, overcrowded housing conditions, many poor families turn to cheaper, more dangerous methods of heating their homes in winter months.

Those killed Friday included four children and two adults of an extended family visiting for the holidays. A family friend was also killed. Four others in the house were able to escape. Many were members of the large Liberian immigrant community in the southwest area of the city.

Among the victims are siblings Ramere Dosso, aged 8, Mariam Dosso, aged 6, and Zyhire Wright-Teah, aged 1. Zyhire's father, Elliot Teah, 23, and his two sisters, 17-year-old Jennifer and 26-year-old Vivian Teah, also died in the fire. A neighbor, Henry Gbokoloi, 54, was also killed.

Harris Murphy, another neighbor who survived with multiple burns, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that the blaze broke out Friday night after fuel added to a kerosene heater caught fire. When a woman tried to move the heater outside, Murphy said, it exploded. The adults tried unsuccessfully to stamp out the fire before

flames blocked the door and swiftly spread up the walls and carpeting of the old house.

Murphy said he and Gbokoloi grabbed some of the children, who had been sleeping on the floor, and ran into a bathroom to escape the flames and wait for the fire department. There, they climbed into the bathtub and turned on the shower. He said he decided to run through the flames after the smoke became too thick.

Fire department officials said that the residence—a basement of a large brick duplex house under renovation—had only a single exterior exit, no passage upstairs, and no smoke detectors. Firefighters found six of the victims huddled together in the front of the basement where they succumbed to smoke inhalation, and a seventh near the basement door where the flames were most intense.

Although the fire department responded within three minutes of being called, officials said it took half an hour to subdue the blaze, which tore through the old house and damaged a neighboring home. Firefighters said there were three kerosene heaters in the ruined residence—a fact that suggests the utility services may have been terminated to the house.

As throughout the US, utility terminations are increasingly common in Philadelphia. So far, this winter, more than 8,800 households in the city have had their heat cut off, according to a recent report from the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission. As the economic situation worsens, tens of thousands more area families will face a similar fate in the coming year.



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