

# Wave of cold-related fire deaths in the American South

A reporter  
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Six people died in heating-related house fires in Louisiana over the weekend, part of a wave of deaths across the South, resulting from the severe cold weather and the dilapidated and hazardous housing stock.

The Louisiana deaths included a mother and her two young children, 23-year-old Brittney Sion, 3-year-old Trimirron Stelly and 2-year-old Analya Sion. Their home in Opelousas, west of Baton Rouge, did not have smoke detectors.

An elderly homeless man who had been living in an empty mobile home with the owner's permission died in a fire in Caddo Parish, near Shreveport. Fire investigators said the man had been using a propane cooking burner to heat the home, and the burner was the cause of the fire.

Another homeless man died in Westwego, a suburb of New Orleans, after he started a fire inside a vacant home in an effort to keep warm. The sixth victim, in Denham Springs, died in a home built entirely of pine wood, without sheet rock, making it highly flammable.

The worst single fire tragedy across the region was in Starkville, Mississippi on December 28, when nine people, including six children, died in an apartment that had no working smoke detectors. The fire was the worst fatal fire in the modern history of Mississippi.

The local fire chief said while a smoke detector might have saved lives, the building was also poorly designed, with only a single entrance and one way to exit from the second floor, where the victims lived. The three adults were themselves young—India Williams, 25; Castella Bell, 18; and Lakesha Gillespie, 20. The six children ranged in age from six months to six years.

At least six died during the past week in cold-related fires in Texas, which saw a large number of heater-related house fires. A couple died in a house fire in

Channelview, just outside Houston, caused by a heating appliance, and a homeless man was killed after accidentally setting himself on fire trying to stay warm. A 4-year-old boy died in a rural part of Brazoria County, just south of Houston, in a fire that sent his grandfather to the hospital with serious burns. A 99-year-old woman died in east Texas after a fire that destroyed the home she had lived in most of her life. A 75-year-old homeless man died in Ingram, in rural Kerr County in the central part of the state, while using a wood fire to stay warm.

Two died last week in fires in Alabama, including a woman who initially escaped a fire that broke out in her home in Ft. Payne, but went back inside in an attempt to save her dog. A man was killed in Enterprise, Alabama, after a gym and two nearby small businesses burned down.

In Florida, there were dozens of heating-related fires in the Tampa-St. Petersburg metropolitan area, many of them caused by the efforts of homeless people to stay warm in abandoned or vacant properties. One group of homeless carried a sink into the living room of an abandoned home, filled it with a flammable liquid and set it on fire to keep warm. The fire eventually spread, but all those in the house escaped. Several fires were caused by candles either left unattended or knocked over by accident. An elderly man died in a condominium fire in Clearwater.

Six people died in fires in South Carolina over the weekend, including an entire family in Honea Path—Fred Jackson, 43, Maxine Jackson, 46, and their 19-year-old daughter Faith. All three died of smoke and carbon monoxide inhalation. There were no smoke detectors found in the house, but fire officials said the mobile home was so badly burned they could not be sure. The family was using the stove to keep warm, as

well as an electric space heater. Two others died in fires early Saturday morning, one in Greenwood and the other in Sumter.

The cold wave of the past several weeks has been the common thread in most of these tragedies, since many homes in the South lack central heating and residents, particularly in the poorer working-class areas, must resort to space heaters, stoves or other hazardous means of keeping warm.

According to the US Fire Administration, “nearly 40 percent of residential fire-related injuries and 50 percent of residential fatalities occur between the beginning of November and end of February.” In other words, these deaths are not the result of “accidents”, but are the predictable consequence of poor housing conditions and poverty when the stress of severe winter weather is added.



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