

Philadelphia house fire kills four children

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A devastating fire early Saturday morning in Southwest Philadelphia killed four children, including four-year-old twin sisters, Maria and Marialla Bowah, four-year-old Patrick Sanyeah, and an infant, Taj Jacque, all in the same home.

Dwen Bowah, the mother of the twins, was able to rescue three of her older children before jumping from a second-story window, but the intensity of the fire made it impossible for her to enter the house again with the remaining children inside. Smoke detectors had been installed last year, but apparently the fire, which may have started on a porch, was so fast-moving that neither neighbors nor firefighters, who arrived on the scene within three minutes, were able to rescue the four victims.

It took more than 100 firefighters over 90 minutes to bring the fire under control. The fire was so powerful that it melted plastic on parked cars and homes across the street. "The flames were just so intense, I couldn't see anything from the smoke," one witness told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. "I heard the little kids upstairs screaming."

A total of eight homes were destroyed and at least 40 people made homeless. The authorities ruled these buildings structurally unsafe, and many families escaped with their lives but lost all of their belongings.

A shelter was set up at a nearby high school and relief agencies are anticipating the number of homeless will grow. "We know there will be more," Renee Cardwell Hughes, CEO of the region's Red Cross, told the media. "These are multigenerational homes."

The blaze, in a neighborhood including many Liberian immigrant families, started in the early hours of Saturday, with the first alarm reported at about 2:40 a.m. While there was speculation that it may have been started by fireworks set off during the Fourth of July holiday, the Philadelphia Fire Department said that it is still awaiting the results of an official investigation.

The neighborhood has been devastated by the fire. Donations of food and clothing have come pouring in from local residents, churches and other charity organizations.

The death toll was the highest from a single fire in Philadelphia since 2005, when five children died in another part of the city. In the 1980s there were several such major calamities. That decade also saw, in 1985, the notorious police bombing of a home occupied by the MOVE back-to-Africa group, sparking a fire that killed 11 people, including 5 children, and destroyed more than 60 homes.

Aside from the devastating loss of life, many of those affected by the fire will have difficulty recovering economically. The region of the city in which the fire occurred, Southwest Philadelphia, is among its poorest areas. The poverty rate stands at over 36 percent of the population, and the unemployment rate is nearly 17 percent. Parts of Southwest Philadelphia were rated in 2010 as among the hungriest areas in the nation, and last year's cuts to the Federal SNAP food-stamp program can only have exacerbated levels of social misery.



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