

Lowell, Mass: Seven die in apartment building destroyed by fire

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Early on the morning of July 10, a three-story apartment building on the corner of Queen and Branch streets in Lowell, Massachusetts was destroyed by fire. Seven people died, including five members of one family.

Authorities have not released the names of those killed, but relatives of the family identified them as Torn (Tony) Zak, his long-time partner, Ellen Vuong, and three of the couple's five children: Anthony, 12, Ryan, 9, and Sayuri, 7. Tony's brother Thearan said two more of the couple's children, boys ages 11 and 14, as well as their grandfather and a roommate, escaped from the family's third-floor apartment.

Chin Bun, 41, also escaped from the third floor alive, but his girlfriend, Tina Christakos, 38, did not. He told reporters she might have been trying to save her dogs. Their roommate, a construction worker in his 70s whose name has not been released, also perished.

Firefighters rescued at least five people from the third floor. Lowell Fire Chief Edward Pitta described a "chaotic and confusing" scene as "the roof collapsed on parts of the third floor, trapping people."

Witnesses to the early morning blaze described a terrifying scene, with people dropping young children to the street and adults jumping from windows to avoid the flames. Nine of the injured were treated at Lowell General Hospital. A firefighter sustained an injury to his leg. All survivors were left homeless by the blaze, and were being sheltered at the Lowell Senior Center.

The building, containing nine apartments housing a total of 45 to 50 people according to press reports, was wood-framed and built toward the end of the 19th century. It was owned by Sanjay M. Patel through a limited liability corporation called DK Ram LLC. Patel also owned the liquor store on the first floor of the building. Records at the Middlesex North Registry of Deeds indicate that Patel took out three mortgages when he bought the building in December 2007.

The three-alarm fire broke out at about 4 a.m. The blaze consumed the building quickly, despite its location only 100 yards from a fire station. The cause of the fire and where it began have not been determined. There has been speculation in the local media that fireworks being stored in the home of the family that perished either caused or contributed to the fire's speed and ferocity.

Marian T. Ryan, Middlesex County district attorney, said an investigation of the fire would be "long and thorough" and would include a forensic review of the apartment building's alarm system. City officials reported that the building was most recently inspected in March 2013 and that its smoke and carbon monoxide detectors were working at the time of the inspection. Massachusetts Fire Marshall Stephen D. Coan said investigators would try to determine whether the smoke alarms were working when the fire broke out.

The *Lowell Sun* reported that a faulty neon sign in one of the first floor businesses had caused a small fire in the building last summer. The electric circuit powering that sign was disabled afterward.

A sprinkler system was not required under the housing code because of the building's age. As in many older New England cities and towns, much of the housing stock, particularly in poorer neighborhoods, dates from the turn of the 20th century or earlier. Due to their wood-framed construction and lack of sprinklers, triple-decker houses and apartment buildings are tinderboxes, quickly engulfed by flames once a fire begins.

Queen and Branch streets, scene of the recent fire, are located in the Highlands section of Lowell. Lowell is the fourth largest city in Massachusetts by population, and the Highlands (Upper and Lower) are its most densely populated neighborhoods. Many workers living along Branch Street are Cambodian immigrants, and the young family killed in the fire was Cambodian.

Lowell, located along the rapids of the Merrimack

River, 25 miles northwest of Boston, was founded in the 1820s as a planned manufacturing center for textiles. By the 1850s the city had the largest industrial complex in the country, with workers in the textile mills weaving cotton produced in the South. Lowell's industry drew immigrants from across Europe as well as from French-speaking Canada.

The last of the city's textile industry closed after World War II. The mills today either stand vacant or have been transformed into office space or residential units. According to the US Census, the home ownership rate in city between 2008 and 2012 was less than 50 percent, while the statewide rate was more than 63 percent. During the same period, 17.3 percent of Lowell residents lived below the federal poverty level.

The most recent city-by-city unemployment figures available from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue show a 2012 official unemployment rate of 8.7 percent in Lowell, much higher than the statewide average.

The Census also reports an average of 2.6 people per household in the city between 2008 and 2012. Given that between 45 and 50 people were squeezed into nine apartments in the Branch Street building, it is likely that they could not afford other rents.

The death toll in Thursday's fire was the largest in Massachusetts in nearly two decades. In 1994, seven people, including five children, died in a Christmas Eve fire in North Attleboro. The circuit of the one smoke detector in the basement of the family's home had been disconnected.

On Friday, the day after the Lowell fire, 25 firefighters were laid off from the Fall River Fire Department. The cutback will leave the department with only 175 first responders in this city of close to 90,000 residents. The layoffs have been prompted by the cutoff of a \$14 million grant from Federal Emergency Management Agency called SAFER, or Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response.



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