

House fires kill 71 people in the US during the first week of February

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At least 71 people in the United States were killed in house fires during the first week of February. This comes on top of a January death toll of 298, as sub-freezing temperatures and soaring utility costs force many people turn to dangerous space heaters.

Missouri had the highest number of people killed, 11, in home fires during the week. Three people were killed in each of three fires and one person died in each of two others.

On February 1, two boys, 7 and 10, died along with their 47-year-old grandmother in Poplar Bluff, a rural community about 150 miles south of St. Louis. The small wood-frame house was already engulfed in flames when rescue workers arrived. Fire officials have not yet released a cause for the fire, but they have said that the blaze was fueled by propane bottles that were inside the house. Propane is commonly used for portable heaters.

On February 4, a 78-year-old woman and her 8-year-old great-granddaughter and 4-year-old great-grandson died in a house fire in University City, a suburb of St. Louis. The fire was caused by an electric space heater. Four other people living in the home were able to escape.

On February 7, a 9-month-old baby, a 2-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl died when fire tore through the 100-year-old home in the farming community of Jameson, north of Kansas City. A 20-year-old man and two other children were able to escape although they were all hospitalized, one of the children critically.

The fire is believed to have started in the living room where the children were sleeping. The rented house had a wood-burning stove for heat and officials did not report hearing any smoke detectors when they arrived a few minutes after the fire began.

The single deadliest fire took place February 4 in the

rural community of Spurger, Texas, in which four children, two boys and two girls aged 4 to 8, lost their lives when the mobile home they were living in erupted into flames at 2:30 a.m. The children's parents along with two other children were able to escape.

Investigators have not yet determined the cause of the fire. Mobile homes, generally cheaply made, are some of the most dangerous dwellings. Often their electric wiring is faulty or overloaded, causing fires.

Their small size makes safe use of space heaters almost impossible, since the heater can't be placed the necessary distance from flammable materials. Once a fire starts, the inferior quality of the construction means the entire home is usually consumed in flames in just a few minutes.

Of the 298 fire deaths in January, Ohio had the highest number with 25, followed by Texas with 23, Pennsylvania with 21 and Michigan with 16.

The number of house fires rises during the winter months as people are forced to use space heaters and take other risks to stay warm. In addition, millions of families are living in substandard homes and often in very overcrowded conditions as a greater number of extended families are forced to live together.

Millions of low income and poor families are struggling to pay for both heat, housing and food, as the drop in crude oil prices has not been reflected in a corresponding fall in home heating costs.

At the same time, the Obama administration has continued deep cuts to the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which has been cut by 30 percent since the official end of the great recession in 2009. LIHEAP funding stands at just \$3.4 billion. Obama proposes to freeze LIHEAP funding in next year's budget at its current level.

Benefit levels and eligibility vary by state, but are

usually only about \$400 per household, which is only a fraction of the cost of home heating during the winter, especially in the coldest states of the Northeast and Midwest.

Last year many states ran out of funding for heating assistance and many states are already reporting that they are running out of funds with the winter not yet half over. Last year, the state of Missouri, where 11 people died last week, didn't pay benefits to 22,000 families that applied. Nationwide, only about one third of families eligible for the benefits actually receive them.

As the Missouri and Texas examples detailed above suggest, large numbers of fire victims are small children. More than half of US children live in poverty and few wealthy people die in house fires.



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