

# Berkeley, California balcony collapse kills six

David Brown  
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Tragedy struck in downtown Berkeley Tuesday morning when a balcony at the Library Gardens apartment building collapsed, killing six and seriously injuring seven more. Five of those killed were Irish students working in the Bay Area over the summer on J-1 visas, while the other was from Rohnert Park, California. Details on those injured have not yet been released.

The collapse occurred at 12:41 AM during a birthday party. The fifth floor balcony flipped over onto the balcony below, dumping the youth 40 to 50 feet down to the street. Four died at the scene and two succumbed to injuries at the hospital. Those injured remain in the hospital undergoing treatment.

It is unclear what precisely precipitated the incident, including whether all thirteen students were on the balcony or whether there were underlying structural issues. Building inspectors called to the scene have red-tagged all similar balconies on the building, prohibiting their use.

The building was completed in January 2007, which, according to city officials, was the last time the balcony would have been inspected. The city of Berkeley has halted access to the public records relating to the construction of the building pending a police investigation, at the request of the city manager. Several observers have pointed to signs of dry rot in the wooden support beams exposed by the collapse.

Bernard Cuzzillo, a mechanical engineer who studies why buildings fail, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* at the scene that the “wood joists are obviously degraded due to dry rot.” Similarly, Gene St. Onge told the *Chronicle*: “This appears to be a classic case of there being inadequate waterproofing at the point where the deck meets the house. If the waterproofing is substandard, rainwater can enter the building, causing dry rot, which can destroy the wood members within a short time, i.e. only a few years from construction.”

Former residents at Library Gardens have regularly complained in Yelp reviews about a lack of maintenance and low quality construction. One resident from 2010, Nicole, complained that a leak in the fourth floor hall ceiling left a gaping hole that went unfixed for months. A 2014 resident, Chan, posted pictures of a broken fire door that wouldn't close and was left in that condition for weeks.

Despite skimping on maintenance, Library Gardens charges its residents exorbitant rents. The cheapest single bedroom apartment, 500 sq. feet, costs \$2,150 a month. Rental prices across the Bay area have been rising sharply, with the median rent for all housing in Berkeley rising 30.9 percent over the past year, to \$3,500. This has created conditions where companies can pocket immense profits by skimping on maintenance while rising housing prices paper over the degrading buildings.

The building is managed by Greystar Management Services, the largest multi-family management company in the United States, which handles roughly 400,000 units. According to its web site, it controls over \$10 billion in global investments and \$3.9 billion in current development projects. It is more than twice as large as the second biggest management company, and also operates internationally, with several thousand units in Mexico and England.

This is not the first time that Greystar has been involved in a building accident. In February of this year, the floor partially collapsed in some of its student housing at Circle University City in Charlotte, NC. At first only the two rooms immediately affected were posted as unsafe, but at the end of May all the residents were told to leave so that the structural damage could be repaired.

One student, Allison Tharp, told NBC at the time, “They said it could possibly be unsafe and they didn't get us out of there immediately, which I think is really

wrong.”

The difficult housing rental market particularly affects students, the foreign-born, and low-paid workers who don't have the time or money to look for housing and have to take the first place they can afford. There are 50 Irish students living in the Library Gardens Complex, and those on J-1 visas generally work low-paying seasonal jobs in San Francisco to partially fund their time abroad.

For example, J1online.ie, which helps arrange visas for Irish students, advertises working as a fashion store sales associate for \$12.25 an hour, minimum wage. Many others work at restaurants in San Francisco's tourist areas. What little they make is quickly eaten up by the cost of housing and other living expenses.

The J-1 program is touted as a tool of cultural exchange but for years it has served as a source of cheap labor. Although the US State Department approves the visas it provides no oversight to the employers, who don't have to pay Medicare, Social Security or unemployment taxes for their foreign-born workers.

In 2012, the State Department tried to give the program a facelift after an AP report revealed widespread wage theft, abuse, and even sex trafficking on the part of employers involved in the program, but according to a 2014 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center the program is “little more than a source of cheap labor for employers” that “has put some young students at risk of human trafficking.”

According to Philip Grant, the Consul General of Ireland to the Western United States, about 8,000 Irish students come to the US on these “cultural exchanges” each year, and he estimates there are currently 700 in the Bay Area.



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