

US: As winter approaches increasing numbers killed in home fires

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As colder weather sets in, there has been a sharp rise in the number of people being killed in house fires throughout the country. The US Fire Administration reports that at least 110 people died in home fires in the last several weeks, bringing the total fire deaths this year to over 2,100.

From November 22 to November 28 at least 62 people were killed and another 48 people were killed the week of November 29 through December 5.

The increase in home fires is most likely result of the utilization of inadequate heating appliances like electric and kerosene space heaters or furnaces not working or in bad repair in response to cooler temperatures. Space heaters and faulty furnaces are listed by the US fire administration as one of the primary causes of house fires.

By comparison, a total of 137 people died of house fires in August. While heating was not the cause of these fires, most of those were the result of the poor housing and overcrowding that low income workers and their families are forced to live in.

The actual number of fire deaths is most likely higher as there is no official reporting of this information. The US Fire Administration only collects data from news reports which often don't know the cause or in many cases the names, age or sex of victims.

The regular occurrence of these tragedies in the United States, one of the most advanced industrial nations in the world, reveal the real social conditions that the working class confronts.

House fires disproportionately affect the most vulnerable of sections of the working class who seek to prevent themselves from freezing if their gas or electric has been shut off, by relying on cheaper, but dangerous alternatives. Such informal heating setups often lead to tragic and preventable injury or deaths.

Nearly every fire with multiple fatalities was in a rental home occupied by more people than the structure was designed to accommodate. Working families often co-habitate in a desperate effort to pool their resources to cope with the higher cost of essential amenities including housing.

This past Friday, in Lynn, Massachusetts, a bedroom community near Boston home to numerous recent immigrants, four people lost their lives in a fire. (See: "Deadly fire destroys three apartments in Lynn, Massachusetts")

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) measure for residence overcrowding is defined as anything less than 165 square feet per person or conditions where there are more than two people per bedroom. The home that caught fire in Lynn, Massachusetts, had only 130 square feet available per person.

The US Fire Administration, collecting data from the media reports, listed that for 2013 and 2014 there were 2,386 and 2,415 lives lost in house fires respectively in the US. The number of children under 15 that were lost to these fires for those two years was 322 and 296 respectively. So far this year 249 children have been the victims of home fires.

Three children were killed when fire completely destroyed a home occupied by two families early Friday morning December 4, in Thayer, Missouri. Thayer is situated in the rural southern part of the state near the border with Arkansas.

The neighbors called the fire department at 3:30 a.m. after they heard two children that had escaped banging on their house. The neighbor described one child as having visible burn injuries.

There were 11 people living in the home with eight of

them children. Two of the children that were taken by the fire were ages two and three. The US Census Bureau reported that the poverty rate for Thayer was 22 percent in 2014, significantly higher than the rate for the state which was 15.5 percent.

Early in the morning of December 1 a house fire killed two children in Meadowview, a working class neighborhood in Sacramento, California. Seven people were living together in the two-story rental home.

The children's father, Jhada Cole-Johnson, said to KCRA.com, "I just woke up, there was fire everywhere. I just tried to grab people and wake them up, I tried to get [Ire and Israel]. I couldn't get them."

Firefighters also tried to reach the children with a rescue ladder. Ire Johnson, 11 and Israel Johnson, 6 were sleeping upstairs and the firefighters initially tried to reach the children from inside the home, but were forced to retreat by the intense and widespread state of the blaze.

Late on the night of November 24 in Pinewood, a small town in central South Carolina where 20 percent of the population lives in poverty, sisters Isaya and Treveah Myers, five and seven-years-old, were overcome by smoke in a house fire. The intensity of the blaze kept their parents from rescuing them. The cause of the fire is still under investigation but likely related to heating due to the recent cooler weather.

In Oswego, Kansas, a fire took the lives of three people, Charlene Sinclair, 71, her daughter Martha Sinclair Clower, 49, and 14-year-old Ian Qualls, who was sleeping overnight.

The blaze was discovered early morning on November 22 by a passing police officer on patrol who made an attempt at entering the engulfed home, ultimately withdrawing due to intense heat. Brad Clower and Orville Nelson survived the fire. Once again the fire officials point to an unsafe electric space heater as the likely cause of the fire.

In northern St. Louis, Missouri, a house fire took the lives of three small children and injured a man attempting to rescue them early in the morning on November 22. The children who lost their lives were ten-month-old Sevon Hutcherson, four-year-old Antoasia Williams and Aniyah Calvin, aged five.

The fire department captain, Gregg Favre, in a statement to local media said that seven people escaped the fire by jumping from the upper floor of the home.

Viances Hutcherson, Sevon's father, tried to rescue the children and suffered serious injuries in the attempt. His older son, Viances Jr., the last to see the children before the fire, told the *St. Louis Dispatch* that the two girls were sleeping on the first floor. "I put the cover on them, kissed them both on the cheek, and went back up to my room. I started hearing screaming and I got up, tried to rush out of my room and then smoke just came in my face. My dad, he tried to run back in the house and grab the two girls and the boy. But he got burned up so he came back out."

Aniya Calvin's grandmother Kamesha Williams told the *Dispatch* that the house was not insured and the family has no money to cover burials, medical bills, loss of possessions, a new place to live or counseling for the survivors. "It's such a tragedy," she said. "That was three different families that got destroyed in that house today."

The fire department believes that the fire was started by one or more of several space heaters that were in the home. Additionally, there was an oven which was also being used to heat the home, which did not have a working furnace or smoke detectors.

According to US Census Bureau, the poverty rate for the 63120 postal zip code where the home is located is over 52 percent for families with children that are under 18 years old. Another indication of the dire social conditions is the fact that 88 percent of 25,200 students enrolled in St. Louis Public Schools qualify for the free school lunch program.



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