

US: 237 perish in house fires in the new year

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Since the beginning of the year, 237 people have been killed in house fires in the US as the winter weather, the high cost of housing and heating bills force people to rely upon risky space heaters, stoves and wood burning fires. Expensive and substandard housing conditions, which often lack basic smoke and carbon-monoxide detectors, let alone sprinklers and fire escapes, add to the deadly problem.

Eighteen people died in Alabama alone, including five people spanning three generations who were killed in a single fire on January 2 in Bryant. The home had no working smoke detectors. Low wages and the high cost of housing are increasingly forcing many families to live together, leading to overcrowding.

Fourteen were killed in house fires in California, and 11 died in both Michigan and Illinois. Maryland and Ohio had 10 fire fatalities each, while Texas and Virginia both had nine deaths. In Pennsylvania, eight people died in house fires.

The number of deaths may likely be higher since there is no official reporting and tracking of those killed and injured in home fires. These figures are compiled from press reports by the US Fire Administration, a branch of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

While the number of fire fatalities is both staggering and heart wrenching, many of these tragedies could have been prevented. Most of those killed would likely have survived with existing technologies such as sprinklers, hardwired smoke and carbon monoxide (CO) detectors in adequate quantity, and fireproof housing with proper, efficient heating systems.

On Thursday, January 14, an early morning fire at 330 Bruce Street in Syracuse, New York, took the life of Heather Taylor, 31, the mother of two young sons. A second person upstairs, Christopher Hook Mazzae, 29, was hospitalized with serious injuries. The two-family apartment house had nine people living downstairs and six on the upper floor where the fire started.

Firefighters pointed to the kitchen stove upstairs as the likely cause of the fire and it can be assumed that with temperatures hovering in the teens overnight the stove was being utilized as heating for the older home's second floor.

There were working smoke detectors in the house, but a working carbon monoxide (CO) detector was needed on the second floor apartment. Those nearest the upstairs kitchen were overcome by CO fumes first and therefore could not be roused by the smoke alarms.

Housing in the area near the fire exemplifies the horrendous conditions that low-income workers are forced to live in. There are six vacant homes within three blocks and a nearby home recently caught fire and sustained heavy damage. The other vacant homes are in various states of dilapidation, a result of the foreclosure crisis.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines residence overcrowding as anything less than 165 square feet per person, or conditions where there are more than two people per bedroom. There were 15 people residing in the six-bedroom, two-family home, typical of the housing conditions faced by many workers in Syracuse.

The Bruce Street home was one of three multi-family properties that were sold together in a bundle by Syracuse Diamond Properties LLC of Utica, New York, to a company called International Education, which lists its address as a post office box in a Utica suburb.

A house fire in Rock Falls, Illinois, claimed the lives of a family of five in the early morning hours of January 13. Those who perished include Patrick Hopkins, 61, his wife Mary, 49, and their children Maggie, 26, Donovan, 16, Katie, 13, as well as three family pets.

Officials believe the fire started in the living room. There was a smoke detector found on the first floor but

none on the second floor. All five people were found deceased in their bedrooms on the second floor after the blaze was extinguished. The cause of the fire is under investigation, but the probable cause is a space heater due to cold weather conditions.

A house fire in Wilmington, Delaware, on January 12 killed three-month-old Zipporah Carroway and three-year-old Elizabeth Carroway. Their mother, Christine Carroway, 37, escaped with severe burns over half of her body. A passerby and a police officer managed to pull her two-year-old daughter to safety. Mark Carroway, the children's father, had just left the home to pick up the family's other four children from school.

Firefighters arrived in less than two minutes after an emergency call was made by a passing ambulance crew. The fire department said the house had no working smoke detectors. The fire is believed to have started in the first floor living room of the two-story home. Temperatures were below freezing on that day. The building was over 100 years old and its balloon frame construction lends to the rapid development of infernos that can overcome inhabitants.

A trailer caught fire around 1 p.m. on January 11 in Montrose, Iowa, taking the lives of three members of a family: Jayden Douglas, 9, Landon Michael Trent, 2, as well as their mother Rebecca Ferrall. Also in the trailer was Jacob Russell, 33, who escaped with serious injuries. The family was living in a trailer home, substandard housing that can become fully engulfed within several minutes, giving occupants little time to escape.

In Huntington, West Virginia, on January 9, a fire took the lives of Ida Thompson, 62, and her grandchildren, Maeshelle, 7, and Nashaya, 4. There were eight people living in the two-story home. Residents were forced to jump from the second floor to escape the rapidly intensifying fire.

In the Fairhill section of North Philadelphia, a row house caught fire on January 8, taking the lives of two people. There were eight people sleeping in the home when it caught fire around 3:45 a.m. Elizabeth Perez initially exited the burning house and reentered to save her two-year-old son Nathaniel Richardson. Elizabeth, who was eight months pregnant, was found holding him. They had been overcome by the thick smoke.

Firefighters pointed to a kerosene space heater as the

probable cause of the tragic blaze. There were at least four other portable space heaters found in the home.

According to the US Census, nearly three-quarters of children in Fairhill under 18 years old live in poverty. The overall poverty rate for the 19122 postal ZIP code was 57.8 percent in 2014.



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