

# Deaths in Bronx fires highlight homeless crisis

Our reporters  
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New York City's homeless shelter population has totaled over 58,000 in recent months, a near-record figure. Officials responsible for dealing with the crisis say that another 3,000 are living on the streets, but this figure is widely considered to be seriously underestimated.

Many of those who are homeless avoid going to city shelters, even in the cold winter months. This winter has been unusually warm—until a cold spell arrived with more than two feet of snow on January 23. A few days later the deaths of two men were reported, victims of fires in abandoned buildings in two different Bronx neighborhoods.

In the Tremont section of the central Bronx, a fire in a derelict aging wood-frame house on Crotona Avenue near E. 178th Street blazed out of control at about 2 a.m. on the morning of January 26. The *Daily News* reported that police said a victim, later identified as 64-year-old David Gonzalez, was burned beyond recognition.

Gonzalez had been living in the building for several years and was well known and liked in the neighborhood. Three other squatters in the abandoned house were able to escape the fire. Authorities said that it had been caused by extension cords using electricity from other sources and stretched dangerously throughout the building.

The Tremont neighborhood is predominately populated by immigrants, with a large number of Latino residents and a high rate of unemployment, poverty and substandard housing. The tragic Happy Land fire of 1990, in which 87 people died in an unlicensed social club, took place only a few city blocks away from the latest fire on Crotona Avenue.

According to a more detailed report in the *New York Times*, the fire in the Tremont section was followed by another in an abandoned building, this time on West Kingsbridge Road, several miles away. The victim in

this case has not been identified. Officials said the blaze was caused by an open flame.

“Squatters and vacant houses have always been an issue,” Michael Parrella of the Fire Department told the *Times*. “They present many different dangers to the public and of course to anyone desperate enough to put themselves in that situation. Accidents are relatively common.”

Another Fire Department spokesman added that cold weather increased the dangers. “When you use multiple extension cords and they power multiple appliances, it can be very dangerous.”

The fire deaths highlight the social devastation that is widespread in the city, especially in the outer boroughs, even as high rise luxury apartments are sprouting up on a weekly basis in Manhattan, only a few miles away.

Workers in the neighborhood described living conditions in the Bronx to a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team.

Manuel Done, a childcare provider who lives in the area, explained, “I just came home one day, and my mother told me the house had burned down.

“This kind of thing has been going on for years in this area. We also had a car fire recently, but there is still a lack of acknowledgment about the situation here. Another house down the street was just allowed to rot until it collapsed. This situation should be raising a lot of red flags.

“We know that they are trying to get higher income people to live in the South Bronx. Everything is being run for the rich. If we don't come together this kind of situation will just keep getting overlooked.”

“I grew up around the Bronx,” said Nadine Coleman, whose auto mechanic shop is located just a few doors down the street. “In the 1980s the Bronx was burning. Landlords wanted to get out. Now there is gentrification going on--maybe not right here, but in Hunts Point and some other areas. Rents will skyrocket.

People used to run to the Bronx for cheaper rent. Now its ‘no can do.’”

A 78-year-old man who lives in the nearby public housing projects told the WSWS, “I knew the man who lived in that house. I considered him a friend. I think he collected SSI for disability. There is another vacant house on the corner but not the same owner. There was no electricity so for light I think he ran a wire into the house for light. I am a retired mechanic and I can tell you if the wire was not hooked up right it could cause a fire.”

Cheryl moved from the Caribbean two months ago to an apartment a couple of blocks from the site of the latest fire. “Look at that house now. Now they decide to board it up. Before people, like that poor man who died, could just go in, but it was not safe. Homeless people do not go into the shelters because they are not safe. These tragedies will continue to happen because when they do not have electricity they use lanterns or candles.

“The economy is getting worse. The housing situation is not fair. My husband and I could not get a space in the lottery for an affordable apartment even though we met all the requirements.”

A recent Fire Department document reported 25 accidental and 38 deliberately set fires in vacant buildings in New York City in 2014. Nationally, seven percent of all fires are in vacant buildings, and these cause about 60 deaths and 225 injuries annually. New York City had 2,545 serious fires in 2015, and 27,403 structural fires.

The combination of the housing crisis, unsafe and inadequate shelters for the homeless, and cold weather is likely to result in more deaths like the ones last week in the Bronx. Only a week before, a resident of the East Harlem shelter in Manhattan was fatally stabbed in the neck by his roommate. The homeless also regularly report thefts of what few personal belongings they have inside the shelters.

Mental illness is a problem among some of the homeless, but the vast majority, including those who suffer from emotional problems and illness, are only looking for a roof over their heads and a way to afford their own apartments. The shelter system offers almost no services, however, and little safety either.

The neighbors in the Tremont area have sympathy for the homeless, and many recognize that they face similar

dangers. As one neighborhood resident told the *Times*, “The squatter houses aren’t a bother at all. Who could blame them for trying when the shelters are so terrible?”

The administration of liberal Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio, however, has nothing more than bland reassurance and empty words to offer the homeless, as well as the one-fifth to one-quarter of the city’s population which subsists below the poverty line. A spokesman for the mayor said, “We’re cognizant both of the safety and quality-of-life issues of the tenants of these places. Through any number of existing initiatives, we hope to reach people to serve them in such a way as to get them into decent, safe housing.”

The “existing initiatives” do not include a massive program of jobs and decent wages, or a housing-construction plan to provide affordable shelter for all. These can only be achieved through the independent political struggle of the working class based on a socialist program.



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