

Nearly 750 dead in US house fires in 2016

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So far this year 743 people have been killed in house fires in the US, according to a running estimate by the US Fire Administration (USFA). The organization, which bases its tally on a survey of published media reports, counted 2,290 fire deaths in 2015.

In the current year, the states with the highest number of fire deaths include Texas with 45 dead; New York, with 41; Georgia, 38; Michigan, 34; Pennsylvania, 32; and California, with 32.

House fires are a manifestation of the American social crisis. The leading cause of these tragedies is unsafe alternative heating and lighting methods, generally utilized by the poor and working poor, often as a result of their gas or electricity being suspended by for-profit monopolies.

The likelihood of fires resulting in death is augmented by outdated and unsafe housing and inadequate fire protection. Much of the American housing stock, extending from one-family homes to multi-unit apartments, has not been adequately appraised for fire hazards. Meanwhile, fire protection has been victimized by severe budget-cutting in recent years. Much of the country is served by volunteer-only fire departments.

The number of people killed in house fires in the US over the last 15 months, at 3,033, according to the USFA, is substantially more than the 2,381 US soldiers killed in 15 years of fighting in Afghanistan. That war, which has killed and displaced millions of Afghans, cost the US government \$1 trillion dollars, according to a 2014 estimate by the *Financial Times*. The current federal budget appropriates less than one one-thousandth of that, \$690 million, in grants for fire departments.

The following is a sampling of recent house fire tragedies:

In Syracuse, New York, on January 20, a house fire claimed the life of Takiya Bell, age 13. The blaze was

started by candles that were being used for light and heating. On the night of the fire, temperatures had dropped to 23 degrees. Emagine Rucker, 2, and Na'Leyah Keith, 13, were injured. The tenants had reportedly been living without utilities since November of last year, when they moved in. The poverty rate for the Pond street home in the 13208 zip code on Syracuse's north side was 33.8 percent in 2014, according to the US Census Bureau.

On February 13, in Fayetteville, West Virginia, two people were killed in an early morning fire likely caused by a basement wood burning stove.

A February 19, a fire in Buffalo, New York, killed Demetrius Johnson, 24, and, in another apartment, Juan Montanez, 49. Before dying Johnson saved the life of his three-year-old son and his daughter, Treasure Brighton, 8. Treasure Brighton suffered severe burns on over 80 percent of her body and remains hospitalized. The poverty rate in the neighborhood is 30.3 percent.

In Bellmont, New York on February 22, an early morning fire took the life of Stephen A. Harrington, 52. The fire is believed to have been caused by a wood burning stove.

On March 3, in Rochester, Minnesota, a four-unit apartment building caught fire in the late afternoon, claiming the lives of Melissa Phiefer, 25 and her 2 year old daughter Emily, who were found unresponsive by firefighters in their basement apartment.

In Orange, Massachusetts, a single family home caught fire on March 6, killing two young girls, Leena Ciolino, 6, and Victoria Gaignard, 8. Leena's father sustained injuries while attempting to rescue the girls from the second story where the fire is believed to have started. Victoria Gaignard was at the house on a sleepover.

On March 7, a fire at a boarding house in northwest Atlanta, Georgia, killed four men and two women. Earnest Eberhardt, 61, the homeowner, was among the

dead. Relatives told the media that Eberhardt would take in people to his house without asking rent. Among the victims were Gene Spurley, 62, Anthony Brown, 54, Velma Rivers, 46, and Anthony Jones, 49. An acquaintance of the victims, Janette Ragland, said that that portable space heaters were in use at the house and were the likely cause of the fire. The poverty rate in the neighborhood is 39.5 percent, and 62.9 percent for those 18 years old and younger.

On March 10, in Omaha, Nebraska, a single-family two-bedroom rental home with ten occupants caught fire in the early morning hours, killing Bibiano Pacheco-Perez, 21, and Brenda Martinez-Palma, 24. The poverty rate in the neighborhood is 41.2 percent, and 60.5 percent among children.

On March 11, in Winchester, Kentucky, an apartment fire killed three and injured six. The dead are Tina Reynolds, 29, Donald Hisle, 36, and Dixie Everman, 71. Half the residents in the ten-unit complex were receiving federal housing assistance.

On March 14, in Orange, New Jersey, a fire in a single family home killed brothers Nishawn and Nayon May, 2 and 7 years old, respectively, as well as their uncle Maurice May, 52. The mother of the boys saved her teenage daughter and suffered severe burns over most of her body while attempting to save her children. Ten people lived in the home. Over a third of children in the neighborhood live below the official poverty level.



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