

# Death toll at least 33 in Oakland warehouse fire

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Just before midnight on Friday, a deadly fire broke out at a dance party in Oakland, California. An estimated 70 people were inside the venue, an old warehouse that had been converted into artist studios known as Ghost Ship.

As of this writing city workers had recovered 33 bodies, but the toll is expected to rise as more of the building is searched. Only seven of the recovered bodies had been identified.

The building itself only had a permit to function as a warehouse, but it was being rented out to an art collective. The interior was subdivided into individual studios on the ground floor and a second floor that could only be reached by a single wooden staircase, where the music was played. The building as whole had only two exits.

The currently confirmed death toll makes this the worst building fire in the United States since 2003, when 100 people died in a night club fire in Rhode Island.

It is not yet clear how the fire started, but it spread quickly through the artists' studios, cutting off any possible escape for many. By the time the fire was controlled, the roof had collapsed onto the second floor and in several places fell through to the ground.

There were almost no fire safety measures in the building. Oakland Fire Department Operations Chief Mark Hoffman told reporters that the building had no sprinklers and that they had heard no reports of smoke alarms going off. Bob Mule, an artist with a studio in the warehouse, told "NBC News" that he rushed to a fire extinguisher only to find it did not work and then had to flee the flames.

Max Ohr, the creative director of the Satya Yuga art collective that rented the building, told the "Today Show" that he was working the door the night of the

fire. After hearing someone report a fire he rushed for an extinguisher but realized it was too late: "The roof had already caught and the flames were coming towards the door at an alarming rate. It took about 15 seconds to go from notification of a fire to completely engulfed."

City officials had received complaints of code violations over an extended period of time, including three so far this year, alleging residential use of the warehouse space and construction without a permit. Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf stated that an inspector was sent to the warehouse on November 17 but was unable to get inside the building to examine it.

Russell Megowan, a former resident of Ghost Ship, told "NBC News" that roughly 20 people lived in the building, drawn by cheap rent.

Even hosting events would have required new permits for the building, but the illegal use of Ghost Ship as a music venue was something of an open secret. Two or three times a month they would host parties on their second floor. Sometimes the location would be promoted openly, while at other times it would be announced the day of the show.

Schaaf announced Sunday that the Alameda County District Attorney was launching a criminal investigation of the fire, but provided no details on whether it would focus on the fire itself or also address questions of negligence on the part of the landlord or city officials.

The use of antiquated and unsafe industrial buildings for housing and entertainment is driven by soaring property values. The median rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Oakland jumped 19 percent from a year ago to \$2,700 in February 2016. The median income for renters in Oakland is only \$3,000 a month. This creates a large gray market for informal housing and

arts venues.

Landlords see no profit in bringing old buildings up to code, or even maintaining them, when they would make far more holding the land until they can sell it to a developer who would just tear the old building down. For their part tenants are hesitant to demand safety measures that would see them evicted, or result in their rent being increased.

According to tax documents, the 4,000 sq.-ft. warehouse was assessed as being worth only \$43,000 in 2015. By comparison, individual artist studios in the area rent for more than that each year. Just a few blocks away from the Ghost Ship, an old cotton mill built in 1917 and closed in 1954 was converted into 74 live/work loft apartments in 2006. Each unit in the refurbished building rents for roughly \$2,500 a month.



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