

Housing crisis and neglect at root of fatal Oakland fire, one of the deadliest in US history

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As the death toll mounts, the horrific fire that broke out at a dance party in East Oakland, California Friday night is now one of the worst such disasters in the recent history of the United States.

The City of Oakland announced early Monday that the number of bodies recovered from the 86-year-old Fruitvale warehouse called the Ghost Ship had risen to 36. The warehouse was being rented out to artists, and the studios were also used as informal housing by about 20 people.

According to survivors and neighbors, the fire spread quickly through *ad hoc* wooden rooms, cutting off any escape from the dilapidated building that lacked basic fire safety measures. Many were almost immediately trapped on the second floor, where a concert was being held, without any means of escape.

Recovery efforts were delayed Monday when one of the building's walls threatened to collapse on firefighters. About 75 percent of the structure has been searched, but the Alameda County Sheriff told the Associated Press that he did not expect to find any more bodies.

Thirty-three of the victims have so far been identified. Many were in their 20s and 30s, but the youngest so far was 17. Three foreign nationals were identified, from Finland, South Korea and Guatemala.

According to one tally by "NBC News," the Ghost Ship fire is the seventh-deadliest building fire in the past 50 years, a list that includes the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. It is the deadliest building fire in the US since a night club in Rhode Island burned down in 2003, killing 100 people.

While the precise causes remain to be determined,

indications are that the tragedy was facilitated by city officials who ignored unsafe conditions, a landlord who neglected basic safety measures and a housing crisis driving people to seek cheap rent in unsafe conditions.

There was no shortage of dangerous flash points in the structure. Shelley Mack, a former tenant who lived in the warehouse for five months, told reporters that the building had no sprinklers or fire alarms and that it regularly went without utilities. Tenants used gas generators or propane stoves to heat their water, and stayed warm in the winter with space heaters. Wires crisscrossed the uninspected wooden partitions that turned the first floor into a maze of studios.

A neighbor, Danielle Boudreaux, described to the *Washington Post* the precarious makeshift stairs to the second floor where shows were held to help pay rent: "It only took two people on it at a time. .. when you stepped on it, it wobbled, and there were ropes holding it up. If you had three people on that it was falling down." Once the fire started, she said, "there was no way you were getting out of that building."

Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley spoke to reporters Monday afternoon, announcing that the fire was a "potential crime scene" and that her office would investigate whether there was any criminal liability. She said that it was too early to specify who might be implicated, but that charges could range from involuntary manslaughter to murder. Any serious investigation, however, would immediately turn to the city itself.

The unsafe conditions, as well as the warehouse's role as an unlicensed apartment and music venue, were an open secret to the landlord and city officials. The Tumblr page for the Ghost Ship contains numerous

advertisements for musical performances. Over the past two years, the city has received numerous complaints, including three this year, regarding construction without a permit and unsafe conditions.

Twice in 2014 and twice in 2016, building inspectors were sent to the warehouse in response to complaints. However, no action was taken to improve the safety of the building. The Oakland Police Department records also show officers responding to reports of a stolen phone at a 2014 New Year's Party where they "canvassed the area and building."

In 2007, Alameda County placed a lien on the property, owned by Chor Ng since 1988, for "substandard, hazardous or injurious conditions." According to public records, Ng has four other properties that have been cited for blight in Oakland.

The conditions found in the Ghost Ship warehouse are far from unique and are well known by the city. Noel Gallo, a city councilor from the Fruitvale district, told CBS, "The reality is, there are many facilities being occupied without permits." He estimated that there are about 200 warehouses "that have no papers, no permit, no fire code, nothing."

The negligence of landlords and city officials is complemented by the broader housing crisis that drives poor people to seek out informal housing for cheap rent.

"What this tragedy really brings home is displacement and other impacts of gentrification: the high cost of housing and the lack of affordable housing," Anyka Barber, co-founder of the Oakland Creative Neighborhoods Coalition, told the *Wall Street Journal*.

Rents have skyrocketed across the Bay Area in recent years. Oakland, which was once a haven for people avoiding San Francisco's rent, is now the fourth most expensive city for renting in the United States.

The median cost of an available rental in Oakland in September 2016 was \$3,000 a month, according to Zillow. This is up 71 percent from January 2013, when it was just \$1,757. Median income for renters in Oakland remains just \$3,000 a month, making most apartments wildly unaffordable to prospective tenants.

The Bay Area is riven with social inequality. While workers in San Francisco and Oakland can barely afford rent, massive new luxury apartments are under construction in the Rockridge and SoMa districts.

Across the Bay from the Fruitvale district where the warehouse burned down is the home of Larry Ellison, who has a personal net worth of \$51.6 billion.

The current spike in property prices is part of a broader economic bubble driven by financial speculation after the 2008 crash. In 2001, 41 percent of US renters spent 30 percent or more of their income on housing. By 2014, this rose to 49 percent, with 26 percent of renters spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing.

A UBS report in 2015 drew a direct connection between the amount of cheap credit central banks, led by the US Federal Reserve and the Obama administration, were pouring into the financial market and exploding rental costs. The authors wrote, "Loose monetary policy has prevented a normalization of housing markets and encouraged local bubble risks to grow."

The Oakland Ghost Ship fire is a horrific tragedy, but one with definite roots in the reality of American capitalism.



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