

US house fire deaths totaled 2,290 in 2016

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Three hundred thirty people were killed in house fires during the month of December, up nearly 50 percent from the previous year. In total, 2,290 people were killed in house fires throughout the United States last year. These figures do not include the thousands that were physically injured and the incalculable impact on the survivors and their loved ones.

To underline the national nature of the problem, these fires are common in all regions of the US. Tennessee had the highest number of people killed in house fires in December, at 20. Nineteen people were killed in California, 17 in Michigan, 15 in Ohio, and 14 in Texas.

Two of the nation's poorest states, Alabama and Mississippi, had 12 and 13 deaths respectively in December. Nationally, 59 children were among those killed in resident fires last month.

For all of 2016, Texas had the highest number of fire deaths at 132, followed by New York with 120, Pennsylvania with 113, Georgia with 111, and California with 106. When the size of the state is considered, West Virginia had the highest rate of fire deaths, followed by Alaska, Vermont, Alabama and Arkansas. Only Hawaii did not report any deaths.

The numbers killed are undoubtedly higher, as the US Fire Administration gathers the figures from news reports and many are never reported. Also, fires like the tragic warehouse fire in Oakland, California, where 36 people were killed on December 2, are not counted since the building wasn't considered a home.

Basic information such as cause of the fire, name and age of victims, type and age of home, homeowner or renter, and whether smoke detectors and other safety equipment were present is not reported in most cases.

A common thread in these fires, however, is that loss of life is largely preventable. In any rational society, a yearly death toll from fires of more than 2,000 people would be considered a national tragedy and measures

would be taken to prevent such a disaster. However, under capitalism the steps necessary to ensure safety cut across the profits of the utilities, construction companies, landlords and investors.

Most fire deaths could be prevented with long-established fire suppression and early detection technologies. Most building codes don't require sprinkler systems or hardwired smoke detectors. Many slum landlords don't even ensure that there are proper fire escapes and battery-operated smoke detectors are present and operating.

One of the frequent causes of home fires is the use of supplemental heating sources, i.e., space heaters, wood stoves and fireplaces. Families often turn to these measures to offset the high cost of heat, poorly insulated buildings or when utilities are shut off for overdue bills.

Families and friends are often forced to live together in overcrowded conditions to afford rent and utilities. Since the 2008 housing crisis there has been an explosion of investment firms and banks buying up foreclosed homes and turning them into rental properties, doing little if any needed repairs.

The blame for these deaths lies at the doorstep of the for-profit system, which wrings its gains from the working class and their vulnerable children, who often pay a steep price for living in inadequate conditions with the loss of their lives.

An Akron, Ohio house fire at 266 E. Tallmadge Avenue killed four people on Saturday, December 3, including long-time companions Omar Riley, 36, and Shirley Wallis, 33, along with their children, eight-year-old Shanice and nine-year-old Anilya. Also critically injured was Shaniya, Riley's 12-year-old daughter, who jumped from the second floor to escape the flames.

Jennifer Koval was also a tenant, living in the attic converted to living quarters of the two-and-a-half story home. Her only escape was blocked by flames, which

engulfed the stairway in what appears to have been the only safe egress from her apartment.

With no fire escape, she crawled out a window and slid down to a second floor porch roof and then made the jump to the ground, sustaining injuries. Jennifer's son and her fiancée Glen Parker were not home at the time.

The American Red Cross reported that many renters were picking up free smoke alarms as demand surged after the fire, from 20-50 units a week to 150 units, indicating that many people are in the same life-threatening situation.

Akron is known as the rubber city, headquarters for Goodyear but no longer for Firestone, which moved to Nashville after a merger with Bridgestone. The poverty rate for the 44310 ZIP code, where the December 3 house fire took place, is nearly 19 percent and just over 30 percent for those under age 18.

Two fires in Baltimore took the lives of four children and physically injured at least one other. The first blaze was in a row house on North Clinton Street in East Baltimore and broke out at approximately 9:00 p.m. on December 7.

There were five people inside, a mother and her four children. The fire claimed the lives of a nine-month-old boy and three-year-old sibling, Nigel and Exekial Ramirez respectively. The mother suffered injuries requiring hospitalization, while a two- and five-year-old managed to escape.

Neighbor Nicole Carter spoke with Channel 2 WMAR about what she witnessed on the night of the fire. She said that firefighters approached the mother, who was trying to save the children in the house and begging for help. "She just was like, 'The babies! The babies!'" and then they went in there and they brought the babies out," Carter said.

Also in Baltimore, a house fire on Dorton Court December 10 took the lives of Tylynn McDuffie, 10, and one-year-old Kamarl Ferrell. With no fire escape, a 27-year-old woman, identified only as the children's mother, dropped her four-year-old to the ground from a window and then leapt out, retreating from the blaze, unable to save the other children while sustaining injuries.

Neighbor Aisha Wright spoke with WBAL Radio and said, "They were good kids. She's a nice lady and everything. No family deserves to go through that."

Once again revealing the frequency of tragic home fires in Baltimore due to the poor housing conditions, a house fire on January 12 claimed the lives of six children. (See Six Children dead in Baltimore house fire)

On December 30, a mobile trailer fire killed three members of a family in Lafayette, Tennessee. Those who perished were Wanda Rush Ray, 69, and her sons, Jimmy Lane Ray, 52, and Ronald Earl Ray, 51. According to the coroner, the cause of death for all was smoke inhalation.

In the Watts section of Los Angeles, twin boys lost their lives to a house fire on December 28. The brothers who perished were Brenton and Braeson Fortson, two-years-old. Benjamin Fortson, their father, risked all in an effort to save them, fighting thick smoke and flames and ultimately suffering burns to his face. Firefighters pulled all three from the blaze, with the father currently in the hospital listed in critical condition. Firefighters could not locate any smoke detectors in the residence.

According to media reports, there were up to 12 people living in the three-bedroom house, which far exceeds the federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guideline of two persons per bedroom. According to US Census figures, the 2015 poverty rate in Watts was 37.1 percent, with nearly 50 percent of children living in poverty.

These figures serve to highlight growing social inequality, where the relegation of a growing segment of the population to poverty and unsafe housing conditions is leading to an increasing loss of life in house fires.



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