

Another house fire erupts in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood

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On December 7, an early frigid Friday morning, a fire erupted in Chicago's Little Village neighborhood. Having escaped the burning homes on the 3000 block of South Keeler Street, family members stood outside huddled together wrapped in blankets watching the firemen at work.

The inferno came in the wake of news a day before that the property that caught fire on August 26 on 2200 block of South Sacramento Avenue, where ten children perished, was likely to be demolished. Cook County Judge Leonard Murray granted an order that displaced tenants, after waiting for nearly four months, would be allowed to finally enter and retrieve their personal belongings.

Firefighters at the scene are speculating that the cause of the fire on Keeler Street may have been faulty electrical wiring or space heaters. The fire broke out on to the roof, and the flames jumped to the next home setting it ablaze. Residents inside were able to evacuate before the flames and smoke engulfed the houses. Firefighters extinguished the flames quickly, but the homes have sustained extensive damage and are uninhabitable.

Andrea, a resident of Little Village and mother of two children, recently told the WSWs about the state of housing in the area, "This neighborhood is an old neighborhood. The city just patches things up to make it look nice. But that is just very shady. They slap on a band-aid. They try to upgrade them, but you can feel the draft and heating is terrible. The floor is cold. I live on the bottom floor, and my house is cold. They just put sidings on and increase the rent, but they don't really fix the problems. The ventilation for cooking is nonexistent. I can't even let my kids play in the back."

A friend of hers who lives on Keeler Street said she had heard helicopters flying close overhead that

morning, but didn't think much of it until she heard of a fire in her neighborhood reported in the news. Police helicopter overflights are common occurrences in the neighborhood.

Though no one suffered serious injuries or loss of life, it seems this was but a fortunate circumstance. There is no word yet on what the families displaced will do now that their possessions and memories have been destroyed.

Little Village is a working-class neighborhood not dissimilar to many others in the US.

As of 2016, 804 businesses were operating in the area, with 11,567 paid employees. The total annual payroll is \$451,169,000, which translates to an average salary for these employees of \$39,000 per year. Approximately 44 percent of all the workers are women. Men work predominately in construction, transportation, food preparation, while women dominate in healthcare, management of businesses and financial sectors as well as education and legal occupations.

Twenty-one percent use public transportation. Forty-two percent of the workforce leaves before 7 am. Mean travel time is 36 minutes, ten minutes higher than mean US commute time. Twenty-one percent must travel more than 60 minutes to work.

Little Village is a highly industrialized area with a scrap yard, a steel recycling center and a plant that manufactures recycled steel products, Crown Steel. There is also an asphalt plant as well and other manufacturing centers. Warehouses from decades past fill out the streets. Signs of gentrification abound with establishments like Home Run Inn Pizza moving in to include cafes and eateries. Still, boarded up businesses sit cold and stark, reminiscent of the establishments hit by the financial crisis ten years ago.

There are over 30,000 housing units in the neighborhood, a majority, 75.5 percent, were built before 1940. Renters occupy 66.2 percent of these units, while in the US owner-occupied housing unit rates are at 64 percent. Forty-five percent of the households moved into their units after 2010 making the neighborhood a transient one.

While 74 percent of all renters pay \$1000 per month or less for their rent, for more than half of residents' rent exceeds 35 percent of their household income, an outcome of worker's grossly inadequate earnings. The median household income for this zip code stands at \$31,445 per year and the proportion of individuals considered below the poverty level is at a staggering 35.6 percent. By comparison, the median income for the US is at \$57,652, and the poverty level sits at 12.3 percent.

These statistics are well documented and precisely measured. The government is quite aware of the conditions of distress and poverty that prevail in working class neighborhoods such as Little Village. It isn't that they choose to do nothing with these figures. It is measured to understand the developing conditions better and use it to drive political strategies and inform the state apparatus.

Poor neighborhoods with old homes are at higher risk of residential fires. The demand for electricity in poorly constructed homes inevitably leads to electrical hazards, plus the added impact of deterioration that leaves these communities at highest risks for such catastrophes. About 8 percent of residential fires nationwide originate in electrical wiring. Also, buildings that are more than 40 years old are at considerably higher risk in catching on fire.

Installation of substandard appliances, faulty heating systems which result in tenants using space heaters to warm their rooms, non-compliance with building codes, lack of city engagement in ensuring neighborhood safety and poor construction are just some of the main reasons for house fires across the United States.



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