Chicago Fire Department cites open flame as cause of Little Village fire that killed 10 children

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12 February 2019

The Chicago Fire Department reported Friday that the fire that killed 10 children in Little Village, a poor Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago, on the early morning of August 26, 2018, was caused by an open flame.

In the early hours that day, the children lay sleeping in a coach house in the working-class neighborhood. At the time, city officials said a substance smoldered on the porch of the house before roaring into a fire.

Eight children died the morning of the fire. Two more would die days later from sustained fire wounds. The children ranged in age from 3 months to 16 years old. The coach house had no working fire alarms.

It is inconceivable that it should have taken this long for investigators to determine the cause of the fire. An article published in the *Chicago Tribune* offers little information that can explain this delay.

The spokesman for the Fire Department, Larry Langford, told the *Tribune* that the fire that started in the apartment's enclosed rear porch was caused by an open flame. Neighbors speaking with the Fire Department investigators had conveyed that the rear porch was a gathering spot where people sometimes smoked and sometimes set off fireworks.

The investigators are unable to determine if the cause of the fire was arson or an accident, or even the source of the blaze. They do note that the fire was not caused by any electrical issues despite the haphazard wires strewn atop the fences and gates that connect electricity from the electric poles to the house.

The only indication for the delay by the fire officials was that they were waiting for the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to rule out electrical causes for the inferno. As the Fire Department has concluded their investigation, the matter is to be turned over to the police to consider any possible criminal motives. The city has agreed that the rear structure where the children had been sleeping will be torn down this summer.

It is remarkable that little information has been shared with the neighborhood on the progress of the investigation or that it should take this long for their findings to see the light of day. Other than playing the blame game with the parents of the children for leaving them unattended—or suggesting that the owner of the building was culpable for violating city codes—there is little else being said or considered.

That a tragedy of this proportion merits only a disinterested and dismissive response by the city glaringly highlights the utter disregard by authorities for the living conditions in neighborhoods like Little Village, which are so rampant throughout the country.

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) reports that there were 364,300 residential fires in 2016. The number of fires has been essentially stable over a 10-year span. With 2,775 deaths reported in 2016 in residential fires, they noted a 3 percent increase trended over the last 10 years.

Overall, including the California wildfires, the USFA reported 1,319,500 fires in 2017, which is down 6.2 percent from 2008. There were 3,400 deaths in 2017, a 9.6 rise since 2008. There were 14,670 fire-related injuries in 2017, down by 15.8 percent compared to 2008. Economic loss was up 12 percent, to $23 billion.

According to historical data (see graph on fire deaths in US), the number of deaths attributable to fires has reached a low point, partly attributable to homes being fitted with smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.

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Though some legislation mandating smoke detectors has been in existence for over three decades at the state level, National Fire Protections Association (NFPA) research found that almost three of every five home fire deaths from 2012 to 2016 occurred on properties with no smoke alarm (40 percent), or with smoke alarms that failed to operate (17 percent). There is a clear link between the growth in home smoke alarm usage with decreased home structure fires. The death rate per 1,000 reported home fires is 12.3 deaths when no smoke alarm or alarm did not operate versus 5.7 deaths when smoke alarm was present and operated.

A report issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency from June 1997, titled "Socioeconomic Factors and the Incidence of Fire," states that "virtually every study of socioeconomic characteristics showed that lower levels of income are either directly or indirectly tied to an increased risk of fire."

According to the report: "The socioeconomic factors related to fire rates are sensitive to each city's unique conditions, and these can be traced back through the history of a city's populations and its buildings. In particular, cities are sensitive to population shifts such as the movements of large numbers of people into and out of a city. In this sense the continued movement of middle- and upper-income residents out of cities to the suburbs and the increasing isolation of the poorest residents in some inner-city neighborhoods has important effects on the socioeconomic characteristics of cities and urban housing stocks."

More recently, during the week of a deadly polar vortex—which saw temperatures plunge to minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit in Chicago—three fires left three dead, one injured and many displaced. On the 2000 block of 53rd street (south of Little Village), two brothers, Abelardo Sanchez, 24, and Pedro Sanchez, 16, perished when they were trapped in the attic of their parent's home by a heavy fire. Kathleen Gomez, a 48-year-old Chicago school teacher, died in a house fire in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood.

As with the Little Village fire, the causes for these fires remain under investigation. What is clear, however, is that the deplorable conditions in these neighborhoods place them at particular risk for fires.

Andrea, a mother of two young children who has been living in Little Village for several years, said, "It's very tragic, especially in this absurd winter. These fires were preventable. If we don't know what happened, it should be investigated. I know the community there is devastated. It still is here [Little Village] after the fire in August. It's sorrowful still. For Pilsen it's still very fresh. I think that it should be mandatory that every place have a working smoke detector. And the city should be held responsible for it.

"The houses in Little Village and Pilsen and many other communities aren't prepared for these severe weathers. They are old and can't manage the stress they go through. Also, the people who own these homes aren't repairing their property or investing in them just to save a little money, which then leads to these tragedies.

"Last Wednesday when the temperature dropped, we lost power. We were told some electric poles caught fire and power had to be shut down. But they didn't fix them. Now the fuses are blowing frequently, and we are constantly losing power. On that day I lost power the temperature in the house dropped 10 degrees in 45 minutes. I had to seal up the whole house, but you could still feel the cold draft on the floor."

Despite repeated reports and studies that highlight the impact of the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the misery and suffering these working-class neighborhoods constantly face, there is little inclination or effort on the part of the city or state officials to address these glaring statistics. It is imperative that the working class not only unite in their struggles at workplaces, but that residents organize neighborhood action committees to confront and take action on these conditions.

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