# Massive gas explosion in Durham, North Carolina leaves 1 dead, 17 injured

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One person is dead and 17 more are injured, 6 critically, following a gas line explosion Wednesday morning in downtown Durham, North Carolina.

The cause of the explosion has yet to be determined. Initially, Durham Police Department spokesman Wil Glenn stated the blast was caused when a contractor digging under the sidewalk struck a 2-inch gas pipe. Subsequent reports and statements by city officials, however, have walked back that statement, "pending a complete investigation."

Durham firefighters responded to an emergency services call regarding a gas leak at approximately 9:38 a.m. The leak was limited to the 100 block of North Duke St. After firefighters arrived they contacted Dominion Energy to begin the process of isolating the gas leak and determining if an evacuation was necessary. Witnesses downtown at the time stated they could smell the characteristic odor permeating the area. Firefighters began evacuating persons near the leak at approximately 10:00 a.m.

Less than ten minutes later a fireball leveled the building located at 115 N. Duke St. and caused significant structural damage to four other nearby buildings. By 10:26 a.m. additional utility crews from PSNC Energy, a subsidiary of Dominion, arrived to assist in turning off the gas, which was still leaking. One PSNC worker was injured in the explosion.

Over a quarter million people live in Durham, which is home to several colleges including Duke and North Carolina Central University. Seven of those injured were taken to Duke University Hospital, while one person is being treated at the North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center at the University of North Carolina in neighboring Chapel Hill.

The concussion from the blast caused glass to shatter and at least one door blew off its hinges several blocks away from the initial blast zone. Local weather radar was able to detect the fire that raged for hours afterwards as firefighters sought to contain the damage as gas continued to fuel the inferno.

Secondary school students at the nearby Durham School of the Arts were evacuated from their campus Wednesday and classes have been canceled today for inspections to ensure the stability of the building and surrounding structures.

Speaking to the *News & Observer*, Jim Rogalski, 58, who worked across the street from the blast in a Duke University building, recalled the chaos that ensued: "People were sitting at their desks and ceiling tiles were falling….You could barely see for 25 feet from all the dust. People were screaming."

Four people working in the same building suffered deep lacerations when the explosion blew out glass windows, according to Rogalski. "There was lots of screaming….it was pretty frantic there for a little bit until help showed up."

While local officials are confident they have an accurate count of all injured persons, firefighter and rescue crews will continue to sift through the rubble to determine if any are unaccounted for. The search could take "up to two days," Fire Chief Robert Zoldos II told local reporters.

Residents have reported that water in their homes has turned "cloudy or brown" following the explosion. The local water utility has stated this is due to the "extra demand on the system" from the fire department as they extinguished the fires.

In a press release Dominion Energy, the American energy conglomerate which posted over $2.4 billion in profits in 2018, relayed its "thoughts and prayers" to those affected. Follow-up tweets by the company sought to deflect blame for the deadly explosion to "a

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third party contractor" that was operating in the area.

According to violationtracker.org, Dominion has been responsible for 87 different infractions, mostly environmental, totaling over $1 billion in penalties, settlements and fines since 2000.

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