

Safety expert says fatal crane collapse in Dallas, Texas could have been avoided

Tim Rivers
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One person was killed and six others were hospitalized when a crane collapsed through a downtown Dallas apartment complex Sunday afternoon as thunderstorms hit the metropolitan area. Three hours earlier the National Weather Service posted a severe thunderstorm watch warning of high winds and heavy hail. More than 300,000 people were left without power from the storms.

A 29-year-old woman, Kiersten Smith, was killed. Of the six people taken to local hospitals, two were in critical condition, two others have been listed as seriously injured, and one was discharged after treatment for minor injuries. An estimated 120 residents lost their homes due to structural damage and more than 300 others are temporarily displaced as the structures are checked for safety and stability.

Jason Evans, a fire rescue spokesman, told the Associated Press late Sunday that first responders had searched accessible apartments and found no one inside. He also said residents living in apartments that are inaccessible because of damage from the crane were either out at the time or among those hospitalized. The building suffered multiple collapses in different areas.

The steel cages of the tower and boom swung down with such force they sliced through the roof and two floors of apartments and seriously damaged an adjacent parking structure sending cars crashing down several levels into a tangled heap.

Scenes of young couples and individuals scrambling to retrieve a few personal belongings filled news reports as firemen, engineers and other experts struggled to assess the damage and reasons for the disaster.

According to Tom Barth, a noted crane safety expert and former federal crane accident investigator, the deadly collapse might have been prevented had

appropriate precautions been implemented before the storm.

Barth, a lifelong crane operator and the owner of Barth Crane Inspections LLC in South Carolina, spoke with the WSWs the day after the deadly collapse. “A lot of information is missing,” he said, “and we do not have a complete picture. Some basic facts are known, however, and they are compelling.”

On the day of the incident, Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport recorded wind gusts reaching a maximum speed of 71 mph, he said. “That is way under the safety limit for tower cranes. They are good for 140 mph. In other words, despite the storm, that “crane should not have gone over backwards.”

Crane companies can prevent catastrophes during a storm without having to dismantle the entire crane, he said. “One of the things I would suggest—and a lot of people do it—is they tie a heavy weight on the crane (so) the boom can’t go over backwards.”

Brakes which resist rotation are designed to release in high winds to allow the crane to rotate, or “weather-vane,” Barth explained. This allows the boom to point downwind to develop greater resistance against overturning.

In a crucial video recording of the collapse, a second crane nearby withstood the storm. “If you look carefully,” Barth said, “the hammerhead crane is weather-vaning and was able to resist the wind. It appears that the crane that collapsed had let wind get under the boom and flip it over backwards.

Barth said the crane industry is growing by leaps and bounds because of the great gains in productivity which cranes can provide. Many workers are rushed into production without adequate training in the hazards and necessary precautions for operating these huge machines.

According to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, Texas leads the nation in deadly crane accidents. Sunday's tragedy marked the ninth crane accident death in north Texas since 2012. From 2011 to 2015, Texas had about four times more crane-related deaths than any other state. In the same interval, nationally there were 220 crane-related deaths reported, for an average of 44 per year over this five-year period. But recent fatal crane accidents have spread across the country.

In April, workers were dismantling a crane in Seattle when the mast collapsed, killing two ironworkers and two bystanders. According to Barth, in order to save time the workers removed the pins that secure the operator house before attaching cables to support it.

In 2016, a 565-foot crane collapsed during morning rush hour in New York City, killing one person.

Dallas-Fort Worth was one of the country's top construction markets in 2018, with more than \$20 billion in project starts. A boom in hotel projects is at the forefront. In December Northland Properties, a Canadian company headed by the professional hockey team Dallas Stars owner Tom Gaglardi, announced it would build two hotels in the suburb of Irving on acreage which is part of a development planned by Dallas Cowboys football team owner Jerry Jones' real estate company Blue Star Land.

Giant construction corporations engaged in multibillion-dollar enterprises have every financial incentive to take chances and risk the lives of their employees. The profits gained vastly exceed the maximum fines allowed under federal statutes for violating safety standards. In 2018 when three workers were killed in a crane collapse due to negligence, the company Manitowoc was fined less than \$15,000, the maximum sum the law allowed.

The website of Bigge Crane and Rigging Co., headquartered in San Leandro, California, which owns the Dallas crane, reports that the company currently owns and maintains the largest inventory of new and used cranes for sale in the US.

A forecast produced by Research and Markets predicts the global crane market will top \$44.7 billion by 2023, with increasing construction spending across the globe the major factor driving the market growth.

In their latest report, "Global Construction 2030," Global Construction Perspectives and Oxford

Economics estimate that construction output will expand by 85 percent to \$15.5 trillion worldwide in 2030, with the US, China and India accounting for 57 percent of that growth.

Professionals predict the construction industry will have one of the largest increases in real output, reaching almost \$1.2 trillion by 2020.

While the industry has been booming, the number of construction workers has yet to recover fully from the Great Recession. There are currently 6.43 million construction workers employed in the US, compared to 7.73 million in April 2006.



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