

East St. Louis, Illinois, mother charged in the death of her five children in apartment fire

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Sabrina Dunigan, 34, has been charged with five counts of endangering the life or health of a child for the deaths of her children in an apartment fire on August 6 in East St. Louis, Illinois. The fire occurred early in the morning on the second floor of the apartment building where she lived.

According to relatives, Dunigan had left briefly to give a ride to her friend. She returned to find her apartment engulfed in flames and rushed into the fire to try to save her five children, suffering burns from her efforts.

She had recently moved into a one-bedroom apartment in the building with her children and her parents earlier this year after a fire destroyed her previous home, also in East St. Louis.

Her parents, Greg Dunigan and Vanicia Mosley, were present when the fire started on August 6 but escaped before the fire reached their room in the apartment. Her children, Deontae Davis, 9; Heaven Dunigan, 8; Neveah “Veah” Dunigan, 8; Jabari Johnson, 4; and Loy’el Dunigan, 2, were all living in one room with her.

The cause of the fire still remains undetermined, but questions remain as to why a fire alarm was not triggered before the fire caused any death.

The reality of social life for the vast majority of the American working class is exposed by tragedies like these. Extreme exploitation of workers leads to conditions where they are forced to live in slum conditions. What little legal protections that workers have from being subjected to living in slum conditions are rarely if ever enforced.

Just over 25,000 people live in East St. Louis, a number that has decreased from 55,000 in 1980 and well below a peak of 82,000 in 1950. More than one-third of residents live in poverty.

This trend follows many deindustrialized Midwest towns in the United States. The jobs that are left are overwhelmingly low paying, leading to average annual income of \$23,779 for 2020. The general state of housing in East St. Louis follows the decline in population and pay. Decades of federal budget cuts, particularly to public housing and other infrastructure, have left cities like East St. Louis full of homes that are in need of investments to improve their conditions. For public housing alone, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that almost \$30 billion in investments is needed just to make up for deferred maintenance across the country.

These living conditions are widespread, and consequently the conditions that give rise to home fires are as well. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), last year saw 1.4 million reported fires in the country. One-quarter of these fires occurred in homes, apartment buildings and other housing structures, causing three-quarters of the deaths and injuries from fires in the United States, resulting in over 3,500 deaths and 15,000 injuries.

Dunigan and her family are just the latest victims in a string of tragedies related to substandard housing conditions. In 2018, a Chicago, Illinois, house fire in the Little Village neighborhood killed 10 children. In 2019, an apartment fire in the Minneapolis, Minnesota, Cedar Riverside neighborhood killed five, in a neighborhood that had experienced another housing structure fire just five years earlier.

Another feature that these tragedies share in common is the evasion of responsibility by the slumlords that control private housing units or the housing authority backed by the local Democratic and Republican parties.

In Dunigan’s case, the landlord of the building where she lost her children, Rudy McIntosh, is a former police

officer for the East St. Louis Police Department, who retired as recently as 2019.

Mcintosh has been provided a platform on the local Fox News station to smear Dunigan as a negligent parent. He has denied claims by Dunigan and her father that the building lacked smoke detectors for periods of time.

There are questions around the degree to which the retired officer is using his connections to avoid any responsibility for the fire in his building. The Southern District of Illinois district attorney has requested that the investigation into the source of the fire be withheld specifically until after the mother is prosecuted.

A rally was held outside the burned out home on Tuesday by approximately two dozen residents, who wanted to show their support for Dunigan and her family. “Obviously, she’s already been through a lot,” Rev. Larita Rice-Barnes told the *Belleville News-Democrat*. “There’s going to be a long road to recovery and healing for her. As a mother, to lose your children, but then have charges brought against you for it, is a devastating and tragic deal. It kind of sends you back into a pit that you’re already trying to work yourself up out of.”



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