

Fire in Philadelphia row house kills 12 people, including 8 children

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Authorities responded to a fire at 6:40 a.m. Wednesday at a row house in the Fairmont neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Firefighters reported “heavy fire” which took the lives of 12 people, including eight children, as crews fought to contain it. Authorities have yet to determine the cause of the fire.

Witnesses to the tragedy told reporters the fire was the second to occur in as many months, with a neighbor identified only as Michelle stating to ABC News that a fire had occurred on the same block before Thanksgiving in November.

Isaiah Brown told news reporters that his cousins had been killed in the fire. “One was 16, one was like 10 ... and seven. You know, they were babies, babies, man. Young children. Didn’t even get a chance at life,” he cried.

Jacuita Purifoy told the press that the seven children who died were her nieces and nephews, and that three of her sisters had also burned in the fire. In comments to the *New York Times*, Purifoy referred to a five-year-old nephew who had survived the fire: “He wants his mom, he wants his dad, he wants his sister, he wants his cousins,” she said.

Neighbor Bill Richards told ABC News that he had heard a woman screaming, “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” before fire trucks appeared on the scene. Others were grief stricken, with one woman on the scene reportedly huddled in a Salvation Army blanket and crying that the loss was “too hard right now.”

According to officials from the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA), 26 people had been living in the row house unit that burned down. ABC News stated that the family had moved in nearly a decade ago and that “due to the pandemic and demand for low-income housing, PHA could not move the family to a five-bedroom home.”

Philadelphia’s Democratic Mayor Jim Kenney arrived on the scene, declaring the loss “without a doubt one of

the most tragic days in our city’s history, the loss of so many people in such a tragic way.” Of the crowded conditions in which the family lived, Kenney merely shrugged, “Sometimes it’s better for people to be indoors than on the street,” he said.

The tourism website VisitPhilly.com boasts that the Fairmont neighborhood is home to “truly world-class museums.” The neighborhood offers “walking-distance access to Philadelphia Museum of Art, Franklin Institute, Rodin Museum and Barnes Foundation,” as well as “proximity to beautiful green spaces and a thriving food scene.”

The Fairmont tragedy is the second most fatal fire in the city’s history. In 1901, an eight-storey building on Market Street went up in flames, killing 22 people. In May 1985, Philadelphia police bombed a residence on Osage Avenue housing the black nationalist group MOVE, resulting in the incineration of 11 people, including five children. Sixty properties in the area were destroyed in the ensuing fire. The event earned Philadelphia the nickname “the city that bombed itself.”

The PHA currently has a 40,000-person backlog in requests for affordable housing and has not accepted any new families in nearly a decade. Mayor Kenney’s most recent budget proposal for the city would dedicate a mere \$14 million to the city’s affordable housing program.

An October opinion piece in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* stated “the last 20 years have brought the best of times and the worst of times to Philadelphia,” noting that while “the city has created 71,000 new jobs,” nearly “65,000 more city residents liv[e] in poverty today than there were in 2000.”

The column continued: “And now, South Philadelphia’s sprawling refinery, where unionized workers often took home annual salaries of \$100,000, is being converted to a logistics center, with neat rows of warehouses that will house commodities produced

elsewhere.” All this gives Philadelphia “the ignoble distinction of being the poorest big city in America” with a poverty rate of 23.3 percent.

According to 2020 data from the Office of Homeless Services, nearly 5,600 people in the city of Philadelphia were homeless. The housing crisis has been deepened by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. A July 2021 Pew Charitable Trusts report noted that nearly 25 percent of all families in the city had fallen behind on food and rent in recent years. Over 75 percent of Hispanic and 55 percent of African American residents were facing difficulties paying rent.

The fire that engulfed innocent families in Fairmont marks a tragic beginning to the New Year in Philadelphia. Due to the latest surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, illness and death stalk families daily across the city.

On Tuesday, the day before the fire, the School District of Philadelphia, officially began the spring semester amid a rapid spread of the Omicron variant. In the days before the holiday break, 17-year-old student Alayna Thach contracted COVID-19 and died tragically, days before she was scheduled to be vaccinated. School and teachers union officials in Philadelphia have declared their opposition to closing schools despite the city having record COVID-19 infections.

Today, January 6, at 7:30 p.m. EST the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, an organization which is dedicated to defending teachers, students, families and the working class from the efforts to force them into unsafe schools, where the virus is spreading will hold an emergency online meeting, “ Close All Schools to Stop the Spread .” We encourage all workers, teachers and parents in the Philadelphia region to attend to oppose the social conditions which are resulting in the deaths of thousands of innocent people. Click here to register or learn more about the event on Facebook .



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