

More details emerge about the causes of Philadelphia row house fire which killed a dozen people

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Details have emerged on the cause of the horrific row house fire in Philadelphia’s Fairmount neighborhood Wednesday morning. The fire broke out in the upscale neighborhood nicknamed the “Art Museum Area” at around 6:40 a.m. and resulted in the deaths of 12 people, including eight children.

On Thursday, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that the cause of the fire may have been as simple as a 5-year old child playing with a lighter near the family’s Christmas tree. According to the publication, the child “told a neighbor—and later a paramedic, a firefighter, and hospital staff—how the fire had started and that his mother had died.”

Authorities are still investigating the claims, with Deputy Chief Dennis Marrigan, the city’s fire marshal, saying that a “very complex investigation” was underway to determine the cause of the fire. Investigations had previously determined that several of the smoke detectors on the upper floors, where the majority of residents stayed, had been inoperable.

House fires are a tragically frequent phenomenon in the United States. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reported nearly 1.4 million residential fires in 2020, the year of its last study. Nearly 15,200 people suffered injuries and 3,500 people lost their lives due to fires that year.

The fire occurred in a rent-controlled “scatter” property owned by the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA). While the PHA listed 20 people on its leases, investigators said they found 18 people living on the building’s upper floors, with eight living below. PHA president Kelvin Jeremiah explained this was caused because “[t]his is the time of year when family gathers.” The PHA president added that his agency was

“not going to be critical of families who have suffered this unimaginable loss.”

A CBS News report on Wednesday noted that “[n]eighbors and residents... sounded the alarm with PHA many years ago about escape routes during a fire.” The story quotes PHA resident Regina Cureton, who states “[the PHA] gave us no fire escape, they told us to jump out the window, that was what I was told by the Philadelphia Housing Authority.”

The tragic event produced an outpouring of grief and support within the neighborhood, across the city and throughout the country. Jacuita Purifoy, who lost 10 family members in the inferno, spoke on Thursday night at a vigil held at Bache-Martin elementary school, where two of the children attended. The event attracted hundreds.

“My sisters, my nephews, my nieces are gone, they are deceased. They are never coming back. They were relevant. They were [people] who were supposed to continue life,” she said.

Ronald Dennison, a transit employee who worked in the area remarked to the *New York Times* how he had recalled seeing the family enter the subway system: “One would come in and pay and hit the button, one of the adults. And then all of the sudden the kids would run in,” he said. Dennison stated he “was just devastated” by the news, recalling how he had realized “Hold it, that’s the group!”

A GoFundMe page set up for funeral expenses by a family member has raised nearly \$250,000 in less than two days. Bache-Martin Elementary School has become “the center of the community—where families have gathered in grief, where officials have spoken and where the hundreds came together for Thursday night’s

vigil,” the *Times* reported.

The *Times* interviewed Kristin Luebbert, a former teacher at Bache-Martin who had taught Quintien Tate-MacDonald, one of the children who died in the fire. According to the *Times*, Luebbert “said that many of her students’ families struggled to remain in the neighborhood as the cost of living went up.”

WHYY reports Philadelphia “is now the least affordable housing market in the region.” The publication notes that “[t]he median home price in Philadelphia is now roughly \$225,000. It was roughly \$170,000 three or four years ago.” This has occurred even as a rental boom, the product of generous tax abatements, has resulted in nearly 10,000 units being built in the city, “more than triple the average annual total of 3,000 to 4,000 new apartments.”

The PHA estimates that the average waiting time for an affordable home is 13 years. Despite this, a survey conducted by the University of Cambridge determined there were 10 unoccupied homes for every homeless individual in the city. The city of Philadelphia’s affordable public housing currently has a \$1 billion price tag in needed repairs while a Pew study recently determined that 23 percent of the city’s residents lived in poverty.

As of 1999 the PHA owned as many as 6,400 formerly-private “scatter” homes which had been purchased by the authority as Philadelphia’s industrial boom ended in the 1960s and 1970s. Local publication *Billy Penn* quoted former PHA director John Kromer, who explained “[s]catter site housing has always been more difficult to manage than conventional high- or mid-rise apartments, both because it’s dispersed and because of the age of the housing.”

This method of public ownership increasingly lost steam as the federal government sought to cut budgets for social spending over the years. A 2014 Center for Budget Policies and Priorities report indicates that federal funds for housing programs fell by 25 percent between 2001 and 2014.

This has caused local authorities to increasingly turn toward public-private initiatives which allow government subsidizing of privately-owned homes.

The Rental Assistance Development Program (RAD), introduced by the Obama administration in 2015, allowed “public housing agencies to leverage public and private debt and equity in order to reinvest in the

public housing stock,” according to the department of Housing and Urban Development. The agency states this initiative was “critical given the backlog of public housing capital needs.”

The Biden administration’s heavily-promoted \$1.75 trillion “Build Back Better” social spending bill had earmarked \$65 billion for the maintenance of affordable housing but has been effectively killed in the Senate by Democrats opposed to any increase in social spending.



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