

Deadliest fire disaster in decades kills 17, including 8 children, in New York City

Daniel de Vries
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A five-alarm fire Sunday in an apartment building in the Bronx left at least 17 people dead, including eight children. Officials reported that dozens more were injured as smoke and flames enveloped the 19-story building. In all, at least 63 were injured, 32 of whom were left in critical, life-threatening condition.

The fire in the Tremont section of the Bronx was the worst fire disaster in New York City in more than three decades.

At a press conference Sunday evening, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said investigators believe a faulty space heater in a third-floor bedroom triggered the inferno. The fire quickly spread throughout internal stairwells, cutting off the escape route for many residents on upper floors. The building lacked the external fire escapes which are typical in many New York City residences.

“This smoke extended the entire height of the building, completely unusual,” FDNY Commissioner Daniel Nigro said. “Members found victims on every floor in stairwells.”

Residents recounted desperate scenes. “We saw moms fainting. They saw their kids dying,” a 13-year-old resident told the *New York Post*. “We saw a bunch of bodies coming out. People from my childhood were dying.”

One woman explained to the *New York Times* how she rushed home from work nearby after receiving a call from her children. Upon arrival, she found them jumping from a third-story window to escape the flames.

While the fire alarm system was activated, it likely proved little use. “The fire alarm goes off in the hallway all the time, at least twice a week,” a resident of the 18th floor told the *Post*. “I don’t know if it’s faulty or what it is, but it goes off all the time. People

on the third, fourth, fifth and sixth went about their day until they saw smoke,” he said.

“There’s no guarantee that there’s a working fire alarm in every apartment, or in every common area,” US Representative Ritchie Torres, a Democrat who represents the area, told the Associated Press. “Most of these buildings have no sprinkler system.”

More than 200 firefighters ultimately battled the blaze for more than an hour before bringing it under control. However, the response was likely handicapped by the vast numbers out sick with COVID-19. As of January 3, the FDNY reported 30 percent of Emergency Medical Services personnel and 18 percent of firefighters were out sick.

“They only had four firefighters instead of the five they are called for because of people out sick because of COVID,” Uniformed Firefighters Association president Andrew Ansbro said. “Several of the first engines were in the same situation. If there was adequate staffing, the fire could have been put out faster, and people would have received medical aid sooner.”

Mayor Adams, Governor Kathy Hochul and Senator Chuck Schumer, who assembled Sunday evening for the press conference to feign horror at the consequences of the fire, have all insisted that no significant measures will be taken to cut transmission of the deadly virus, despite record cases and overwhelmed hospitals and emergency services.

Sunday’s high-rise fire is a disaster on top of a catastrophe. In the same zip code, one out of every four residents has tested positive for COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. One out of every 239 has died. Just this past week, three percent of all residents have tested positive.

The pandemic, together with the underlying issues

that contributed to the horrific fire, demonstrate that what happened Sunday in the Bronx was not simply an accident. It was the product of a social order that places no value on the lives of the working class.

The fire took place in a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx, the most impoverished borough in one of America's wealthiest cities. Many immigrants from Gambia and elsewhere occupied apartments at the now burned-out apartment building. More than 40 percent of the neighborhood is foreign-born. More than a third reside in poverty.

The neighborhood, reflecting conditions throughout New York City and beyond, has a severe shortage of affordable housing. Nearly six out of every ten households spend more than 35 percent of their income on rent.

Many of the residents of the Twin Parks North West, where the fire took place, rely on federal Section 8 vouchers to cover their rent. The development was a publicly financed project built in the 1970s to provide housing for low- and middle-income tenants. However, the state handed over management of the building complex to private companies, which oversaw years of decay.

Maintenance backlogs have long plagued Twin Parks. Housing researchers Yonah Freemark and Susanne Schindler noted in a 2015 piece on Twin Parks that "private ownership at the Southeast and Northwest complexes produced a significant number of violations in 2010, the most recent year available (11 and 27, respectively)." City data show the problems persist. Since 2018, New York City has logged 11 official violations at the property.

The current group of owners, which purchased Twin Parks North West and several other properties last year for \$166 million, includes Camber Property Group. One of Camber's co-founders, Rick Gropper, is a member of Mayor Adams's transition team advising him on housing issues.

The fire in the Bronx comes just days after a blaze ripped through a row house in Philadelphia, claiming 12 victims, including eight children. It also follows a pattern of deadly fires in residential buildings in the Bronx. In December 2017, a fire killed 13 in a five-story apartment building less than a mile west of Sunday's blaze.

The tragedy Sunday has been met by an outpouring

of solidarity and concern from workers in New York and beyond. In just four hours, a GoFundMe page set up raised more than \$100,000 in donations from more than 2,000 people, exceeding the initial goal more than fivefold.

The catastrophic loss of life in the fire in the Bronx, only a few miles from Wall Street, is a product of the same subordination of all of social and economic considerations to the interests of the financial oligarchy that is responsible for the criminal response to the pandemic itself, which has led to the deaths of nearly 860,000 people in the United States.



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