New Year’s Day row house explosion levels homes, injures five in Philadelphia

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An explosion on New Year's Day in the Port Richmond neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, leveled several row homes and left five people requiring medical services.

The explosion occurred around 2:50 a.m. on the 3500 block of Miller Street, according to city officials. At least three individuals were buried under rubble from the explosion, with two freeing themselves and another requiring emergency rescue. According to ABC News, the victims are a 64-year old woman, a 47-year old man, and a 44-year old woman. Two other men were also reported injured.

Local news station WGAL added that in addition to the collapsed row homes, “windows [were] blown out” and “cars were pushed from the street and debris was scattered everywhere.”

“This decimated the block,” said Kenneth B. Paul, leader of the neighborhood’s civic association, in a statement to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Other residents recall hearing “a loud boom” and waking up to their homes collapsing all around them.

Local resident Chris Heinsinger told ABC News “I had my head turned towards [my girlfriend] and I was like, ‘We're going to Wawa’ and just out of nowhere it was like a loud bang and I just felt my whole car push over to the curb.”

According to the Philadelphia Fire Department’s assistant fire chief Charles Walker, many gas leaks were detected on the premises and a noticeable “smell of gas coming from multiple areas.”

“We were very fortunate from what we know now not to have a loss of life, because it’s the middle of the night and everyone is sleeping,” Walker added in comments to ABC. “And if it’s confirmed to be a gas leak, it’s very rare to have the magnitude of this type of damage occur to not have loss of life, truly a blessing.”

Philadelphia Gas Works (PGW), the city’s publicly-owned utilities provider, has not confirmed the source of the explosion. However, the city’s aging gas lines have been placed under increasing strain with the recent extreme weather patterns leading up to the explosion New Year’s Day.

On December 24, Christmas Eve, temperatures reached a low of 12 degrees Fahrenheit. On New Year’s Day, only a week later, the city’s temperature was 52 degrees, a 40 degree difference from Christmas Eve. The rapid shift of high and low temperatures can produce cracks and fractures in piping, leading to the accumulation of ignitable gas.

PGW has experienced a number of similar disasters in recent times. An explosion in December 2019 that killed two people and destroyed five row homes was reportedly caused by a cracked gas main which had been built in 1928. In 2021, the family of Brian Diu and Rudi Kambong, the two victims, filed a wrongful death suit against PGW, alleging that the pipeline had been a “ticking time bomb.”

The neighborhood in which the explosion took place has also been impacted by the municipality’s old and decaying lines. In 1999, an explosion nearby destroyed three homes and sent 8 people to the hospital.

“It’s been 20 years [since the last explosion] and nobody has fixed that issue [with the gas pipes],” stated neighborhood civic association leader Paul to the *Inquirer*. The group is holding an inquiry of city officials into the source of the disaster on Wednesday.

The disaster occurred a year after a row house fire in Philadelphia’s Fairmount neighborhood claimed the lives of 12 people, including 8 children. The fire occurred in an overcrowded rent-controlled property which was supposed to have been monitored and maintained by the Philadelphia Housing Authority.

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According to reports, 26 people were living in the small apartment, while the city did little to offer them alternative living arrangements.

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