

104 people across the United States died in home fires during last week of December

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More than 100 people across the United States died in home fires during last month's deep freeze when temperatures plummeted to below zero in much of the Midwest and Northeast and fell below freezing in most of the country.

Overall, more than 2,263 people died in home fires for 2022, including 267 children under the age of 15. These numbers are sure to be an undercount as there is no centralized reporting of fire deaths, and the US Fire Administration count relies on news reports. Often the age and sex of the victims is not known and the cause is listed as under investigation.

Last week's fires included three especially deadly fires, one in Buffalo, New York another in Newcomerstown, Ohio and a third in Crossville, Tenn which accounted for 17 dead, including 11 children.

The Buffalo fire broke out on New Years eve, just before 7:30 a.m. and rapidly consumed the one and a half story wood frame home. Firefighters who arrived at the scene within minutes of the 911 call say the house was already filled with smoke.

Three young girls ages 7, 8 and 10 were pronounced dead at the scene. Two other children, a 2-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy, died at Oishei Children's Hospital.

An aunt was able to escape the fire with an infant, while the children's 63-year-old grandmother is hospitalized in critical condition with second and third degree burns covering much of her body.

In Newcomerstown, Ohio, a family of six were killed Christmas weekend when their home was engulfed in flames in an early morning fire on December 26.

The County Medical Examiner's Office has yet to release the identity of those killed. However, family and friends have identified the victims as Leroy Elliott, 36, and Terrin Hendricks, 32, and their four

daughters—Addison, 13, Aerial, 9, Abigail, 8, and Alyssa, 5.

Neighbors say they believe the fire started around 12:30 a.m. and that they heard a loud explosion at 1 a.m. When firefighters arrived at 1:30 a.m. the entire two story home was engulfed in flames and had collapsed into the basement.

Brian Peterman, investigations assistant bureau chief for the state fire marshal's office, told the local news outlet WKYC that a wood burner, kerosene heaters and electrical space heaters were being used to heat the home. He said the heating devices were “most likely not used in the proper manner.”

According to Weather.com, temperatures in the area dropped more than 40 degrees on December 23 to minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit and remained between that and a high of just 13 degrees over the weekend.

Neighbors say that the family had been living there for about a year and that the children were very friendly to everyone. Investigators are seeking to determine the owner of the home.

Later that same day, six family members in Crossville, Tennessee were killed when their home caught fire in the early morning. Killed in the blaze were Chris McCoy, 32, and Melissa McCoy, 23, along with their two little girls, 3-year-old Ebonee and 4-year-old Arabella. Trent McCoy, 55, and his wife Karen McCoy, 54 were also killed.

During the cold spell that swept most of the country from Dec 23 to the end of the year, at least 104 people died in home fires. Most of those deaths occurred in the Northeast and South. In addition to the Elliott-Hendricks family, 11 others in Ohio were killed in fires. Four people died in Pennsylvania and there were a total of nine deaths in New York.

In addition to the McCoy's, four other people were

killed in four separate home fires in Tennessee. In Georgia six people died in house fires, in Louisiana 4 people were killed, and in Texas 7 people were killed.

Pennsylvania had the highest number of reported home fire deaths in 2022 at 168, followed by Texas with 148, with New York and Ohio each recording 138 deaths.

While each of these deaths has a very unique set of circumstances, the majority are ultimately the result of lack of affordable and safe housing with proper heating and insulation from the cold. Under capitalism, housing, like all social needs, is subordinated to profit instead of the needs of the people.

In Buffalo more than 1 in 3 people are living in poverty. With the cost of rent and housing exploding, most low-income families are paying substantially above one third of their income for rent and many are paying over half their income just for housing.

Three generations of the family, 10 people, were living in the one and a half story wood framed rental property on Dartmouth Street in Buffalo when it burned down. As housing prices soar, more and more people are forced to live under a single roof. Investigators have yet to release the cause of the fire. Working smoke detectors were present.

The Buffalo fire came as crews were still digging out from the massive blizzard that hit the area over Christmas weekend killing more than 39 people. City, county and state officials left the streets of Buffalo unplowed for days as people froze trapped in their cars or homes that had lost power.

The Elliott-Hendricks family had been living in their home for about a year. Newcomerstown is a small town of about 4,000 people south of Akron. A teacher who used to teach in the local high school told the *World Socialist Web Site* that most people who live in the town have to drive 45 minutes or an hour for a decent paying job. “All the jobs in town are low paying. There’s a Dollar General, a few gas stations and one or two companies in the industrial park. Most don’t pay very well. You have to go away to make a living.”

A factory that produced filing cabinets closed in 2006. After operating since 1917 its closure ended over 500 jobs. “I understand the town wants to develop the site,” said the former teacher. “However people say that the clean up would be too expensive. There is all that lead and heavy metals in the ground that it would

cost too much to clean up.”

Over 20 percent of the town’s population lives in poverty according to the government census. The average household income is less than two thirds of the rest of Ohio, which is itself below the country as a whole. With the cost of rent averaging over \$700 a month, a large portion of residents are paying over 55 percent of their income just on rent and utilities.

The use of wood burning stoves and space heaters, while unsafe, is not uncommon, as people try to save on heating bills, leading to many other such tragedies.

Throughout the country, working class families are struggling with wages that do not keep up with prices, shorter hours and the constant threat of layoff.

The Biden administration, while funneling nearly \$1 trillion into military and spy agencies, including spending \$100 billion on the war in Ukraine has cut social programs for the working class.

In 2021, the Biden administration and Congress allowed the expanded child tax credit to expire, which was the single largest factor for driving a record number of families with children into poverty. The Biden administration also cut back school breakfast and lunch programs which provide all children with breakfast and lunch at school.



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