

# Three men die in a fire that ravaged an overcrowded house in Queens, New York

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The three men who died in a house fire on Chevy Chase Street in Queens, New York on Sunday are but the latest casualties in a long line of unnecessary death and destruction in the city, including recent house and apartment building fires in The Bronx.

Their deaths are the result of the critical shortage of affordable housing compounded by rampant poverty, rapacious landlords and a Democratic Party-controlled city government which turns a blind eye toward gross violation of the most basic safety measures.

The latest tragedy occurred early Easter morning, April 20, at a house in the Jamaica Estates neighborhood in the New York City borough of Queens. Jamaica Estates is a generally wealthy section of the borough, including the mansion where President Donald Trump grew up.

Nevertheless, the two-story house in question, clearly originally designed as a single-family residence, and still registered as such in city records, had been extensively subdivided into a dozen or more cubicle-like spaces, spread from the basement to the attic. Each of these “apartments” was rented out to working class men, most if not all reported to be immigrants, at exorbitant rates. One survivor reported paying \$1,000 per month for his tiny space.

In addition to the three victims, aged 45, 52 and 67, eight of the nine survivors were taken to local hospitals, one with critical injuries, according to the New York Fire Department (FDNY).

The house was a death trap, with multiple code violations, including makeshift partitions and a proliferation of jerry-rigged electrical wiring. In addition, the crowded conditions meant that the residents’ belongings were stored in every available space, including stairwells, impeding rapid escape during the emergency. There are multiple accounts of

tenants jumping out of upper story windows to escape the flames. In addition, the fire department reported that there were no functional smoke detectors in the building. The FDNY Commissioner attributed the conditions as due to “carelessness.”

This tragedy should not have been a surprise. City Buildings Department records include at least 55 complaints having been filed against the building since 2003, with the most recent dating to 2023, all of which are recorded as resolved or closed. It is standard department practice, when denied access to a building after multiple attempts to conduct an inspection in response to a complaint, to mark a case as closed, in order to move on to the deluge of other pending cases. This effectively gives landlords virtual immunity to do as they please, regardless of the severity of the problem.

In a prime example of “too little, too late,” the Buildings Department issued a full vacate order after the building was determined to be uninhabitable after Sunday’s fire.

New York is notorious for its domination by predatory real estate interests, Donald Trump’s businesses being a prime example.

Time after time, illegal practices by greedy landlords have led to tragedy. At each new instance, city officials express surprise and regret, but accept no responsibility, often blaming the occupants for conditions imposed on them due to their poverty and the lack of affordable housing. The fire commissioner commented on the Chevy Chase Street fire, “It’s a sad day” and “It’s a lesson for all of us.”

The landlord, Misbaah Mahmood, who is immediately responsible for the dangerous conditions that led to the deaths, ran unsuccessfully in last year’s election as a candidate for the New York State

Assembly on the “People First” line.

The housing crisis in the city is a manifestation of the skyrocketing growth of income inequality. According to a report in the Gotham Gazette, New York has the greatest disparities in income of any major US city, with the top 1 percent of the population getting 44 percent of the income in the city. This is nearly four times as great as 30 years ago. The inflation-adjusted income of the bottom half of the income spectrum actually declined in real terms.

One of the results has been the rapid growth of homelessness.

A recent report by New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli stated that homelessness increased 53.1 percent between January, 2023 and January, 2024. He also found that the number of homeless children increased from 20,299 in 2022 to 50,773 in 2024. The total homeless population now exceeds 158,000. DeNapoli blames the rise in homelessness on the influx of asylum seekers. In fact, the cause lies much deeper in the failure of the capitalist system.

The lack of affordable housing for the working class of New York City has been a growing problem for decades, with developers concentrating on more profitable luxury housing. This scarcity of supply has allowed landlords of available lower-income housing to charge exorbitant rents for grossly inadequate and dangerous accommodations. For many, even such degraded conditions are not affordable. The situation will only get worse as the Trump administration takes an axe to federal housing funding and staff.



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