

# House fires during the holidays kill scores of people across the US

Shannon Jones  
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A spate of fatal fires over the holidays has exposed the reality of widespread social distress behind the media-created image of a prosperous and contented population in America. A large portion of the victims were children, for the most part living in poor neighborhoods and dilapidated homes, in many cases without gas, light or heat.

Each year thousands of workers and young people are killed in house fires across the United States, with the winter months of December, January and February accounting for the greatest number of deaths.

Among the recent deaths:

- \* Nine children died in Detroit as a result of house fires over the Christmas weekend. The blazes occurred in impoverished neighborhoods affected by service cuts in the Detroit Fire Department.

- \* Five people, including two children, died December 30 in a house fire in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was the third fatal fire in Grand Rapids in the past 10 days.

- \* A Mexican immigrant family of six were killed in a fire in Dale City, Virginia, outside Washington DC.

- \* Seven died in two New York City apartment fires, including three firefighters in a senior citizens' home where the sprinkler system was not operating.

- \* A father and two of his children were killed in a fire at their Santa Clara, California home.

- \* Five people, a couple and three young children, died in an apartment fire in Memphis, Tennessee.

- \* Two died and five were injured in an apartment fire in Perth-Amboy, New Jersey.

The United States has one of the highest fire death rates of any major industrialized country. Fires kill on average 4,500 people a year, more than all natural disasters combined. Another 26,5000 are injured. Yet these foreseeable and preventable tragedies are presented by the media as freak events beyond human

control. The *Detroit Free Press* quoted an official with the National Fire Protection Association who described the rash of fatal blazes in the city as "bad luck and a random fluctuation."

Unlike hurricanes and earthquakes, residential and commercial fires are largely man-made phenomena. The likelihood of one dying in a fire is directly related to social and economic conditions such as the availability of modern and safe heating and housing, and access to protection by adequately manned and equipped fire services.

Even a cursory examination of national statistics on fatal fires indicates a correlation between poverty and the fire death rate. Seven of the nine states with the highest fire fatality rate in 1995 were in the Deep South. Mississippi and Alabama, two of the poorest states, had the highest death rates in the nation, with 44.5 and 32.5 deaths per million, respectively. Illinois and Michigan, with large populations of poor people in the inner cities, had the highest death rates among major industrial states. This year the fire death rate in Detroit, the poorest US big city, is running at more than five times the US average. On the other end of the scale, the state of Hawaii recorded no fire deaths in 1995.

What the recent fire fatalities reveal is that an entire section of the US population is living under conditions that barely meet the requirements of modern civilization. Hundreds of thousands of working class families are living in old and substandard houses, apartments and trailers that are little more than death traps. Every year thousands of households, unable to pay utility bills, have their water, gas or electricity shut off, greatly increasing the risk of fire.

In Detroit last month two firefighters nearly died attempting to rescue an eight-year-old boy trapped in a

house fire started by an overturned candle. Power to the home had been shut off by the local electric utility.

Fire departments across the country have been decimated by years of budget cuts. In Detroit, five ladder trucks were recently deactivated by the city. The firefighters union says the department is currently understaffed by 100.

The virtual silence by the media and establishment politicians about the housing crisis is one reflection of the immense social polarization in America. The death and injury of scores of workers evoke not a single serious corrective proposal.

The policies of the Clinton administration and the Republican Congress are fueling the social breakdown. All of the housing programs initiated in the 1960s have been dismantled. Public housing is no longer being built in the United States. How many additional deaths have resulted from cuts to home heating assistance programs and the dismantling of welfare?

This is not to mention the scores, if not hundreds, of homeless people who die every year in America from exposure to the cold and other life threatening conditions. Over the past several weeks six homeless persons have died on the streets of Boston.

Given the existing state of technology even a single fire death is one too many. A social system incapable of putting resources to work to address the basic needs of people for adequate and safe housing is a system in deep and incurable crisis.



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