

Four days of violence and death

Social conditions and tensions in the US take their toll

By David Walsh
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These are a few events that took place in the US from Friday, December 3 to Monday, December 6.

Six firefighters died in a warehouse blaze Friday night in Worcester, Massachusetts, a city of 170,000 people 40 miles west of Boston. The fire occurred at the abandoned Worcester Cold Storage and Warehouse Co. building on the edge of the city's downtown.

Firefighters entered the structure because it was believed that homeless people were living there. A wave of heavy, black smoke, which apparently was produced when the fire reached a layer of polyurethane foam inside the walls, disoriented the firefighters and forced them to withdraw from the building. A head count revealed that two—Paul Brotherton, 41, of Auburn, and Jeremiah Lucey, 38, of Leicester—were missing. Four men sent to find them—Thomas Spencer, 42, of Worcester, Timothy Jackson, 51, of Hopedale, James Lyons, 34, of Worcester, and Joseph McGuirk, 38, of Leicester—never returned.

The tragedy is directly attributable to social decay. The warehouse was an abandoned wreck, similar to buildings in many US cities, with no electricity, no water, no heat and no sprinkler system. The presence of the homeless in such buildings is also a widespread phenomenon.

In an effort to divert attention from these issues, authorities Wednesday charged a homeless couple—Thomas S. Levesque, 37, and Julie S. Barnes, 19—with involuntary manslaughter in the firefighters' deaths. The pair, who apparently had been living on the second floor of the warehouse for several months, allegedly knocked over a candle during an argument Friday.

Early Saturday morning 13 people, apparently

undocumented Mexican farmworkers, died when the van in which they were riding struck a tractor-trailer rig on an icy highway 35 miles east of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The truck on eastbound I-40 had stopped because of stalled traffic ahead caused by another accident. The van's owner had removed the back seat and packed 17 people into the vehicle. A tow truck operator described the scene as “gruesome.”

A US Border Patrol spokesman reported that documents found in the van indicated that the occupants had come from Chiapas and Oaxaca. One of the survivors told authorities that the workers were being driven to Kentucky. The driver, allegedly a smuggler of undocumented workers, had a list of names and the amounts he was being paid for transporting the agricultural laborers.

On Saturday, in Sacramento, California, a man allegedly shot five of his seven children, before fatally shooting himself in the head. The killings took place after the man had argued with his wife. Two children escaped, one through a bathroom window.

Police said that Kao Xiong, approximately 30 years old, used a rifle and shotgun to kill the five children, aged two to eight years old. Mr. Xiong's wife had left before the shooting and did not know about the deaths of her children until she returned home.

A group of men shot five women to death in a working class neighborhood in Baltimore Sunday night, according to police. The five victims ranged in age from 18 to 54. The men were seen leaving the neighborhood in a 1992 Nissan shortly before 7:30 p.m. A car matching the description was involved in a carjacking in the drive-through lane of a McDonald's restaurant a short time later. A plainclothes security

officer fired at the suspects.

By Tuesday Baltimore police had arrested two suspects in the weekend murders, Ismael Malik Wilson, 27, and Tariq A. Malik, 20. As police approached one of the residences where they thought Malik might be living, he staggered toward them with a knife wound to the throat. He collapsed on the front steps, and remains in critical condition.

The killings of the women brought the number of people killed by gunfire in Baltimore over the weekend to 10.

In Fort Gibson, Oklahoma a seventh-grade student allegedly opened fire on classmates Monday morning with a 9-millimeter pistol at a middle school, wounding four. Two 13-year-old boys were taken to Muskogee Regional Medical Center, 10 miles away, one shot in the arm and the other in the leg. A 12-year-old girl was rushed to a hospital in Tulsa, about 50 miles away, after receiving a cheek wound. The fourth victim, a boy, was shot in both arms.

The suspected shooter, 13 years old, reportedly began firing randomly as students gathered outside Fort Gibson Middle School for the start of classes at about 7:45 a.m. A school official told reporters, "The students were gathered outside. Another student just walked up and fired on them." The alleged shooter had no prior police record and, according to other students, belonged to a teen Christian group and "had lots of friends."

Police reported Tuesday that the gun had been fired at least 15 times in the school shooting. The boy is on suicide watch. Prosecutors have not yet said whether they will charge him as an adult.

A man fired by an accounting firm in Knoxville, Tennessee returned to his workplace Monday and fatally shot the office manager. Knoxville police are looking for William D. Manies, 52, in connection with the shooting. The victim, Lorraine Lawhorn, 45, was the wife of Jeff Lawhorn, the firm's owner. She was shot once in the head and pronounced dead later at a hospital. According to police, Manies carried at least two weapons into the office and argued with an employee before opening fire. Manies fled in a car, after another employee attacked and disarmed him.

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