

US fire death toll in 2017 reaches 2,152

By Steve Filips
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As the holidays approach there has been a heart wrenching increase in fire deaths of children, highlighting the deplorable housing conditions and systemic poverty within the US. The US Fire Administration (USFA) collects information on civilian casualties due to fire and reports that as of this writing, 2152 people have lost their lives in fires. The prior year's total was 2,290.

The three states most impacted in November were Texas, with 21 lives lost, Illinois with 16, and California losing 14. Texas had the most fatalities for all of 2016 - 132. The state's toll stands at 126 thus far in 2017.

The house fire crisis disproportionately impacts the working class, which faces substandard housing conditions, as well as declining living standards.

The beginning of this winter season has seen unusually cool temperatures in the southern US, which has led to increases in fatalities. Inevitably the onset of the winter heating season sees an increase in the loss of life and debilitating injuries because of the use of less safe, alternative heating methods such as space heaters. The poor condition of many older houses and apartments is generally characterized by inadequate insulation or improperly maintained or non-functioning central heating systems, often the result of strained budgets.

An equally serious problem is the high cost of utilities, which have outstripped any gains to workers' stagnant wages, forcing unthinkable choices between necessities such as medicines, food, education and medical care. As a consequence tens of thousands are impacted by the social crime of utility shutoffs, forced to live without light and heat in the winter months.

The USFA designated category for young people includes only children up through the age of 13. Those 14 years of age and older are not included, likely to blunt the true scope of the crisis. As a result, the total

for November is 25 compared to the same period last year when 24 died. November's total fatalities were 227, far exceeding last year's 191 lives lost.

These figures also don't account for the life changing injuries, both physical and emotional, inflicted on the victims. Many often don't have any form of insurance, exacerbating the suffering.

Some of the more recent house fires in the United States include:

* A fire in Baltimore, Maryland which broke out sometime before 1 a.m. on December 13 in an older two-story row house. The blaze took three lives: Alicia Evan and her two young daughters Layla and Amani, four and five years old.

Fire officials have not reported a cause for the fire, but stated that there was at least one working smoke detector.

According to the US Census Bureau the poverty rate in Baltimore for those 18 and younger is 33.3 percent, and undoubtedly higher in some sections of that city.

Baltimore has recently seen a horrific rise in the death toll from fires. In the last year alone there have been 28 people who have perished in fire disasters that could have likely been prevented if more resources were available.

* In another tragic fire, on December 14 in Vicksburg, Mississippi a house fire took the lives two young children; Mariah Dearman and Glen Williams, 16 and 27 months old.

Firefighters arrived at the home within minutes of the initial call to find two adjacent homes fully engulfed. Before their arrival, the children's uncle Thomas Dearman 24, attempted their rescue and suffered severe burns to his face and arms. The modest homes were old style wood frame construction and had a fireplace, which was probably the cause of the fire.

The state of Mississippi is one the poorest in the US. The Census Bureau poverty rate figures for ages 18 and

under statewide last year was 31.5 percent, while for Vicksburg it was a staggering 55.8 percent.

* On November 27, Brian Perez Jr., 10, and his great grandfather Tony Perez 85, lost their lives from in house fire on Tradewinds Road in Wichita Falls, Texas. The city of Wichita Falls lies near the Oklahoma border. The Census Bureau reports a 29.2 percent poverty rate for young people.

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