



Editor's note: After NFPA collects the fire departments' definitive reports, Fire Watch author Ken Tremblay reviews recent fires in a variety of occupancies.

Three boys die in unattended-candle fire in Minnesota

A candle left burning in the living room of a wood-frame house ignited combustibles, and heat and smoke spread to the second floor, where it fatally injured three sleeping boys. Smoke **alarms** on the second floor and in the basement **were useless because their batteries were missing.**

The two-story unsprinklered house, which was 52 feet (16 meters) long and 24 feet (7 meters) wide, had a 24-foot (7-meter) by 24-foot (7-meter) detached garage at one end. The house contained two apartments, a one-bedroom unit in the basement and a three-bedroom unit on the first and second floors. There were no smoke alarms installed on the first floor.

At 1:47 a.m., the police notified the fire department of a house fire with people trapped. A 40-year-old woman was standing outside when firefighters arrived, screaming that her babies were still inside and that there were people in the basement.

Fire crews advanced a 1 3/4-inch hose line through the front door to attack the blaze and search for trapped occupants. A second crew searching the basement apartment discovered that the occupants had already evacuated and that the fire hadn't spread to the basement. On the second floor, however, firefighters found two boys in one bedroom and a third boy in another bedroom. The boys, two 10-year-olds and an 11-year-old, were taken to the hospital, where they were pronounced dead.



Three boys died and a two-family house was destroyed in a late-night fire that broke out when an unattended candle ignited combustibles.
Photo: ©Star Tribune 2002

Investigators determined that the fire began in the living room near the front door when an unattended candle ignited nearby combustibles. The remains of a chair, a cabinet, and magazines were found near a steel candle holder. The fire spread up and out through the doors, living room wall spaces, and stairs. The house, valued at \$75,000, and its contents, valued at \$50,000, were total losses.

Facts & Figures

- A 2004 U.S. telephone survey found that 96% of the households surveyed had at least one smoke alarm.
- Roughly half of home fire deaths result from fires in the small percentage of homes with no smoke alarms.
- Homes with smoke alarms (whether or not they are operational) typically have a death rate that is 40-50% less than the rate for homes without alarms.
- In one-quarter of the reported fires in homes equipped with smoke alarms, the devices did not work. **Households with non-working smoke alarms now outnumber those with no smoke alarms.**
- Why do smoke alarms fail? Most often because of missing, disconnected or dead batteries.