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Why Are So Many College Students Dying in Fires?

Dozens Have Lost Their Lives in the Past Five Years, Many in Off-Campus Housing

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, Md., Jan. 28, 2006

From WNT

David Ellis never had a chance when fire blocked the door of his basement apartment last week near the University of Maryland.

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David Ellis

Ellis' landlord had been cited because the windows were too small to fit through. It was enough to make this father move his daughter out of the building.

"For some reason I had in mind it was a quaint, quaint college building," said the father, Gordon Domaschk. "And obviously it was a little too quaint."

In the past five years, 82 students have died in college fires, a majority of them within two miles of school.

Simulations show it can take just moments for a typical college student's room to go up in flames.

Off-Campus Danger

Almost 80 percent of college fire fatalities happen off campus, where students often crowd into older buildings without sprinklers or updated electrical systems, according to Ed Comeau with the Center for Campus Fire Safety. Alcohol is a common factor.

"Many of the fires that we see in college housing, in fact [the] vast majority of them, are preventable," Comeau said. "There are steps that can be taken prior to the fire to ensure that it didn't have the fatal outcome we see."

When a fire tore through a 136-year-old house near Miami University in Ohio last April, three students were killed --including 21-year-old Julie Turnbull.

"She was my little girl," said her father, Doug Turnbull. "She loved me a lot. I loved her a lot."

Turnbull was spending the night with friends at the house rented by nine students.

"College students typically don't think anything is going to happen to them," said Pete Piringer of the Montgomery County Fire Department. "That is why it is important to expect the unexpected."

Firefighters in Montgomery County say the people most likely to die in a fire are either the elderly or the very young -- simply because they can't get out. But when you see how quickly a fire spreads -- it can double in size in just a minute -- even able-bodied college students are at great risk.

What to Do

The Center for Campus Fire Safety says parents should check out where their children are living, make sure there are smoke alarms and two ways out, and have a fire inspector look at the property and electrical wiring.

Parents can download a list of questions they should ask about their kids' housing at [The Center for Campus Fire Safety's Website](#), <http://www.campusfire.org/>.

"I've thought about it in every house my girls have lived in," said Linda Turnbull, Julie's mother. "You think there's a window that they can get out of. But, you know, I didn't check smoke alarms."

And Julie Turnbull died -- one month before her graduation.

ABC News' Laura Marquez reported this story for "World News Tonight."

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