

MINNEAPOLIS

Unusually high number of Minneapolis apartment fires this winter

The seven deaths this winter in Minneapolis fires was double the total killed from fires in all of 2018. All but one came in an apartment complex.

By **Natalie Rademacher** Special to the Star Tribune | APRIL 24, 2020 — 9:35PM

Minneapolis apartment buildings reported 47 fires this winter, a 60% increase compared with previous years.

Most of those fires between November and March were small and contained to the units where they started. But big fires at a Cedar-Riverside high-rise and the former Drake Hotel were serious enough to cause deaths or injuries and result in a loss of much-needed affordable rental housing.

Seven people died this winter in Minneapolis fires, all but one in an apartment complex. That's double the total killed from fires in all of 2018.

Increase in apartment fires in Minneapolis this winter

There were about 60% more fires in Minneapolis apartment buildings this winter, between November and March, compared to previous years.

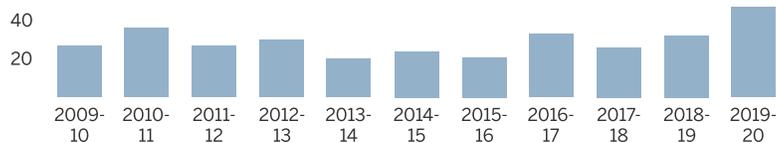


Chart: Natalie Rademacher, Special to the Star Tribune • Source: [Minneapolis Fire Department](#)



DAVID JOLAS - STAR TRIBUNE

Residents of a Minneapolis high rise were evacuated early one November day after a fire broke out on the 14th floor of the building,

Officials from the Minneapolis Fire Department and the city's Fire Inspection Services said they don't know why there were more fires than usual this winter. About half were deemed accidental, but the Fire Department hasn't yet determined a cause for nearly a third of them, including the Drake Hotel fire.

While the number of building fires typically goes down during warmer months, there are concerns that there could be more fires in the coming weeks as families do more cooking at home as a result of the March 25 stay-at-home order to help slow the spread of COVID-19. The order is in effect until May 4.

On average, about 29 fires break out in multifamily dwellings each winter in Minneapolis. Seventeen of this winter's 47 fires occurred in February, including one where a [couch caught fire at an apartment on Minneapolis' South Side](#) (<https://www.startribune.com/medical-examiner-woman-54-died-of-burns-sustained-in-s-minneapolis-apartment-fire/568847472/>). A 54-year-old woman suffered severe burns and died three weeks later.

In March, a [large fire broke out on Central Avenue](#) (<https://www.startribune.com/uncertain-fate-for-victims-of-large-central-avenue-fire-in-minneapolis/569024682/?refresh=true>) in northeast Minneapolis, destroyed several

buildings that housed businesses and apartments and displaced five residents.

The higher number of multifamily dwelling fires also pushed up the overall number of fires this winter to 142, despite a slight decline in fires at single-family houses and duplexes. Over the past decade, there have typically been about 120 structural fires in Minneapolis between November and March.

Brad Schmoll, manager of Fire Inspection Services, said these accidental fires are often related to cooking, smoking and candles. When there is an increase in fires like this, the city's rental inspection department reviews inspection records and looks for deficiencies, he said.

Bryan Tyner, assistant fire chief, said his department hadn't been aware of the increase because they typically analyze their data on a calendar-year basis. Total structure fires each year have remained steady recently, with 292 last year.

Since Gov. Tim Walz's stay-at-home order went into effect, there has been at least one large fire in the city, at a [fourplex in north Minneapolis](https://www.startribune.com/more-than-30-flee-early-morning-fire-in-north-minneapolis-fourplex/569314742/) (<https://www.startribune.com/more-than-30-flee-early-morning-fire-in-north-minneapolis-fourplex/569314742/>) that displaced 23 people in early April.

Getting help to families who lose their homes during this pandemic is also posing a greater challenge because of social distancing, said Alex Wincell, an American Red Cross volunteer.

The Red Cross has had to change the way it helps displaced families.

"People who do this kind of thing, we like to comfort and take care of people," Wincell said. "Not being able to give them a real hug is quite a change."

Normally when there is a fire, a local Red Cross chapter is contacted by a first responder and volunteers go to the scene to help support residents. Now, that process includes a Red Cross dispatcher asking health screening questions of both residents and volunteers. The volunteers are taking steps to maintain a safe distance, often video-chatting instead of meeting in person.

The Red Cross is also putting people up at hotels, when possible, instead of encouraging displaced people to stay at a shelter or with family or friends, and it is no longer able to provide items such as a blanket or toys for children.

Fires at apartment buildings also result in the loss of much-needed housing units in the city, either temporarily or, in some cases, permanently.

This is problematic because the city has about 15,000 fewer affordable housing units than it did in 2000, and production of new affordable housing has not kept pace with the loss, according to Minneapolis' 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

The Fire Department data don't specify how many units were affected by the fires, nor how many may have been permanently lost.

The fire at the [Drake Hotel](https://www.startribune.com/demolition-underway-at-fire-ravaged-drake-hotel/566539882/) (<https://www.startribune.com/demolition-underway-at-fire-ravaged-drake-hotel/566539882/>), which included apartments and served as an overflow homeless shelter, resulted in the demolition of the 93-year-old building and the loss of 146 already scarce low-income apartment units.

Eight units at the [Cedar High Apartments](https://www.startribune.com/fire-department-cause-of-deadly-minneapolis-high-rise-fire-undetermined/565693812/) (<https://www.startribune.com/fire-department-cause-of-deadly-minneapolis-high-rise-fire-undetermined/565693812/>), a public housing complex, are still unlivable following the November fire that resulted in five deaths.

That fire led to calls for greater fire-prevention efforts because the floor where the fire started did not have a sprinkler system. Currently only 16 of the 42 Minneapolis Public Housing Authority's high-rise buildings have sprinklers throughout the building. The agency is trying to secure funding to install sprinklers in the remainder.

Rep. Mohamud Noor and Sen. Kari Dziedzic, who represent the area where Cedar High Apartments are located, introduced a bill (<https://www.startribune.com/housing-groups-call-for-funding-as-minnesota-considers-sprinkler-mandates/568704382/>) in the Legislature in January that would require the installation of sprinklers in most high-rise apartments statewide. The bill is unclear about who would pay for the sprinklers.

The bill was moving through the House and Senate when the Legislature partly adjourned in March due to COVID-19. Jeff Horwich, director of policy and external affairs for the Housing Authority, said he is unsure what will happen to the bill.

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