

Connecting the dots on today's fire problem by James Pauley

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The Grenfell Tower fire in London has been a horrific fire tragedy. With a loss of 79 lives thus far, it is one of the most tragic fires to occur in the UK in recent decades. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families of the victims as well to the first responders involved in the very difficult recovery operations. We have reached out to the UK to offer NFPA's support and assistance in any way needed.

News stories have talked about the flammability of exterior cladding, the lack of fire sprinklers and the notion of "shelter in place" amongst other subjects. On its own, it is a horrendous

tragedy. In combination with other recent events, some disturbing trends emerge which could set fire safety back for decades.

For example, in less than one year [we saw 36 people perish in the Oakland Ghost Ship fire](#), a former warehouse being used as living and entertainment space. The fire raised questions about appropriate permitting for its use, code enforcement, lack of fire alarms and the role of occupants in understanding the impact of their surroundings on their own personal safety. We saw a fire at a packaging factory in Bangladesh that killed 23 in a building with woefully inadequate fire protection. We saw a wildfire in Tennessee burn over 17,000 acres of land and kill 14 people, prompting questions about pre-planning, building in the urban interface to withstand wildfire, fire service ability to respond to an event of this magnitude and public awareness around this growing threat. Another raging wildfire in Portugal claimed the lives of 62 people, many burned in their cars as they attempted to flee, raising similar questions about planning and preparedness. We saw a six-year-old girl die in Connecticut when a fire ripped through the recently constructed house that, if it had been built to meet the national codes, would have had a home fire sprinkler and likely a much different outcome.

Each of these incidents is an individual tragedy. Taken together, they depict a larger global problem warranting action. Looked at in their entirety, they are a collective example of how, either intentionally or accidentally, the fire prevention and protection system has been broken. A system that the public believes exists and counts on for their safety. A system that, through complacency, bad policy and placing economics of construction over safety, has let the public down.

Where have we gone astray? In each of these scenarios as well as many more not mentioned we can point to one or more factors:

- the use of outdated codes and standards
- acceptance of reduced safety requirements to save money
- ignoring referenced standards within a code
- lack of education around the application of the codes and standards
- reduced enforcement
- a public unaware of the dangers of fire

When government and other entities don't adopt or designers don't use the latest versions of codes and standards, they lose the benefit of the latest technology, research and collective wisdom related to fire, electrical and life safety.

When policy makers decide to remove life safety and property protection provisions from codes, they have substituted politics for technical requirements that were determined after extensive input from across the spectrum of knowledgeable people.

When users fail to review and follow standards that are referenced in the codes, they aren't ensuring the right practices and products are used in the right situations, increasing vulnerability to disaster.

When the professionals involved in design, installation, enforcement and maintenance have not kept up to date on the latest requirements they can end up applying products improperly leading to catastrophic results.

When jurisdictions, under fiscal pressures or lack of understanding of the importance, reduce enforcement efforts, they place their communities at risk as buildings deteriorate, change ownership or type of use.

And when the public takes safety for granted and is uneducated about fire risks, their improper or uneducated actions can place them in peril.

The system the public relies on for managing fire safety is broken and a single solution isn't the answer. It will take a systems approach to fix it. At NFPA, we are focused on looking at the entire system and working with everyone involved to fill the gaps.

We may not be able to prevent every tragedy from occurring, but by recommitting to and promoting a full system of fire prevention, protection and education, we can help save lives and reduce loss. That is the story that should consume the news of the day.