

**Inadequate and Bad Housing—An  
American Tragedy**

**EXTENSION OF REMARKS**

**OF**

**HON. JACOB K. JAVITS**

**OF NEW YORK  
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Monday, June 30, 1952**

Mr. JAVITS, Mr. Speaker, the statistics on the number of persons who are obliged to live in inadequate housing in our country today are alarming. But even more shocking are the human tragedies that comprise these statistics. Seven Americans burned to death in a recent fire in a Brooklyn tenement, a building deemed unfit for habitation yet occupied, like thousands like it, by families who have little opportunity to find housing elsewhere within their means.

Appended hereto are a series of articles from the New York Post by the noted housing expert Charles Abrams, which tell eloquently the story of this tragedy, its origins and the problems it poses for us all:

**[From the New York Post of June 20, 1952]  
HOUSING EXPERT WARNS FIRE HAZARDS PERIL  
THOUSANDS HERDED IN CITY'S ILLEGAL  
HOMES  
(By Charles Abrams)**

The seven human beings burned to death in a Brooklyn tenement last Wednesday morning are only the most recent victims of a fire hazard that threatens thousands of others living in New York City.

According to records of the Department of Housing and Buildings, 106 persons died by fire in their homes in 1951, and 124 died the year before. They died in many kinds of buildings—in windowless rooms in which they were herded 6 to 10 in a room. They died in new-law tenements which were supposed to be "fireproof," and in tinderbox dwellings the construction of which has been illegal for 50 years.

The total number of fire violations filed against buildings in New York now exceed 240,000.

The most serious item is failure to provide a means of escape. Another is failure to fire-retard stairs or provide sprinklers.

Cooking spaces have been set up in closets without proper fire protection. Worse still, hundreds of people have been herded into buildings which can safely house only a third that number.

The largest number of victims in these firetraps are Puerto Ricans and Negro in-migrants. In the last 10 years there have been hundreds of thousands of in-migrants from Puerto Rico. There has also been an in-migration of several hundred thousand Negroes. Unable to find decent dwellings at the same cost as paid by other citizens, they are being herded into death traps like the ones which victimized Anna Rodriguez and her three children and the Dento family.

For these death traps, from \$65 to \$80 monthly per room is being charged, and families are doubling and tripling up to pay the rent. More than 6,600 buildings are listed as having been illegally converted to take advantage of this traffic in death, but there are thousands of others.

City officials have been aware of the danger for years but have refused to meet it.

Old houses, long ripe for the wrecking crew, have been opened to illegal occupancy; dozens of stores and windowless cellars now house as many as 10 persons to a cubicle.

In one case four corners of a coal cellar were leased at \$17 a month for each corner. It was occupied by seven adults and 18 children. The use of illegal basements is common.

The house at 1101 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, in which the three adults and four children met their deaths Wednesday was typical of thousands of others.

The victims came from Puerto Rico. They could find no shelter here at reasonable cost. The Brooklyn tinder-box was the best they could find. Landlords like Bessie Honig have been providing houses for these people at \$15 per week and more. Often a bonus or "key money" has to be paid in addition.

The wooden building had been classed as an old-law tenement 50 years ago. It was subsequently converted so as to allow two stores on the street and parlor floors. Some 17,000 such wooden buildings still stand in Brooklyn and about 7,000 are in other boroughs.

A fire occurred in the building on March 3, 1831, but no violations were filed against it.

In 1948 there was another fire.

On February 14, 1950, the fire department found there were no secondary means of escape from the building. There was also inflammable rubbish in the cellar and the cellar ceiling was not fire retarded. The cellar stairs were not enclosed either, so as to afford escape to the street.

On about April 6, 1950, a tenant complained he wasn't getting hot water. An inspector found the building had been illegally converted and was now occupied as four furnished rooms, each housing a family.

The borough superintendent has told the press that he recently tried to file violations against the building for illegal conversion. The Post learned that a memo to Borough Superintendent Salzman by the Housing Division states:

"Inasmuch as the building was not a multiple dwelling and not illegally occupied as one, no violations were reported. There has been no inspection of the building by the Division of Housing since July 6, 1950."

## **LACK INSPECTORS**

There are only 30 inspectors in all of Brooklyn to take care of violations and these are too busy investigating complaints to follow up on illegal conversions and death traps.

By 1952 there were at least 25 persons occupying this 2-family dwelling. There were no fire escapes for these 25 persons; the walls of the building were thin strips of wood lath covered by about one-sixteenth inch of plaster. There was no escape to the roof, no sprinkler system, no secondary means of egress.

The fire started on the second floor, quickly engulfed the stairway, and cut off escape to windows. It broke through the wooden party-wall into the two adjoining buildings.

The seven human beings in this illegally converted dwelling never had a chance.

Emotion is now running high and everybody is focusing indignation on the landlord, Mrs. Bessie Honig. But there are thousands of Bessie Honigs in New York City today.

From 1911 to 1936 the total number of deaths in old-law tenements had been about 50 annually and citizens were aroused. Fire-safety laws were enacted, thousands of fire-escapes installed and fire-retarding enforced.

Today, thanks to the illegal conversions and over-crowding, the annual death toll from fire is higher than it was before the installation of fire-escapes and fire-retarding in New York.

All the progress made under Commissioner Langdon W. Post and the LaGuardia administration has been lost.

The figures show this. In 1936 there had been 28 deaths in old-law tenements and 10 in new-laws—a total of 38. But in 1951, despite the demolition of many old-law tenements, there were 35 deaths in old-law tenements and 23 in new-law tenements—a total of 58. There were 48 deaths in other dwellings, of which 7 were in illegally converted buildings. In 1950, in fact, the deaths in old-law tenements were already twice as high as in 1930.

From 1929 to 1937 there was not a single death by fire in a Class A converted dwelling. Last year there were eight.

The indictment of Bessie Honig, therefore, will not identify all the culprits.

There are others who must share the blame for the seven deaths—and among them may be some officials of the city.

**[From the New York Post of June 22, 1952]**  
**HOUSING EXPERT REVEALS HOW POLITICS**  
**CRIPPLED FIRE INSPECTIONS**  
**(By Charles Abrams)**

There has been an almost complete break-down for housing law enforcement by the city since June 14, 1948.

The breakdown was no accident. It was effected by official order. That order still stands. It played its part not only in the seven deaths at the Bedford Avenue firetrap but in the 100 other deaths by fire last year.

Behind official order lurks a long, sordid fight—the fight to control the power to inspect and to report violations, one of the richest sources of political influence in the city.

Four years ago, J. Raymond Jones, a Harlem district leader, who had been made Deputy Commissioner of the Housing and Buildings Department by Mayor O'Dwyer, quietly turned control of all violations over to the five Borough Superintendents of Buildings.

At that time, violations were piling up. Civic associations and this newspaper called attention to the dangerous housing conditions in the city.

**CRITIC HANDED A VIOLATION**

One of Jones' critics was the Rev. Don Benedict of the Protestant Parish in Harlem, who had charged the Housing and Buildings Departments with failure to enforce violations. Subsequently, violations were filed against Benedict's church.

The Jones' order shifting responsibility to the Borough Superintendents received the approval of Bernard J. Gillroy, then and now Commissioner of Housing and Buildings.

After Impellitteri's election, Jones was succeeded as Deputy Commissioner by Frederick S. Weaver. When Weaver took office he found that, though technically he was still in charge of violations, he had no control over the inspectors. They were now working for the Borough Superintendents.

Weaver at once sensed the danger. On March 14, 1952, 3 months before the Bedford avenue fire, he handed Gillroy a memo which said that the 1948 order "emasculated the Division." Weaver charged that his "duties were completely abrogated," leaving him without jurisdiction. It left the Division of Housing "without a legal head and has made the Deputy Commissioner of Housing in effect the subordinate of the five Borough Superintendents."

### **WON IN 1900, LOST IN 1948**

This virtual elimination of the Housing Division was in direct violation of the City Charter, which puts the Deputy Commissioner of Housing in charge of enforcement. The Charter Revision Commission expressly retained a separate housing division "to safeguard the living conditions of the people especially in the lower income groups."

The fight for a separate housing department was won back in 1900 by the old Tenement House Commission, and resulted in setting up a separate tenement house department to avoid "divided responsibility," and political pressure upon borough officials.

"It is apparent," said the Commission's report, "that without a separate division violations will receive a small amount of attention \* \* \* the shift of official responsibility has become quite a science."

All the gains made in the last 50 years in creating a separate department to protect the poor have now been lost. Responsibility is still being shifted and political pressures are still "a science." They are being exerted where they can be most effective—at the borough level.

Weaver told me: "I can do nothing in face of this order. We do not have a staff. Inspections must be made at least once a year through a cycle survey and we are not doing it. All we are doing is answering minor tenants' complaints. We have no adequate facilities for discovering illegal conversions and illegal occupancies. As long as that order stands I can do nothing."

It appears that Weaver has been protesting his figurehead status for months. He insisted he had no further authority over inspectors, clerks or "even the stenographers who send out the violation notices to landlords."

On April 29, 1952, the Welfare Council learned from Weaver that he was now a minor "figurehead subject to the control and direction of some employees who, but for the order, would be his subordinates. As a result of this division of responsibility, together with an inadequate staff, complaints are bound to pile up and enforcement is bound to lag."

Ira S. Robbins, executive vice president of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council of New York, protested that "for four years the taxpayers' funds have been squandered to pay the salary of a major official who had no more power than that of an office boy. \* \* \* The program of law enforcement has reached a new low."

None of this has had any effect on city officials, however, and the 1948 order emasculating the Housing Division remains in effect. Meanwhile 6,617 illegally converted buildings are still occupied, and enforcement of hundreds of thousands of fire violations is almost nil.

Death by fire for 230 human beings has been the price paid in the last two years above.

There have been as many deaths by fire in multiple dwellings in the single year 1951 as in all the four years 1945-48—just prior to the Jones order.

**[From the New York Post of June 23, 1952]  
"CITY'S SLUMS WORST," ABRAMS  
(By Charles Abrams)**

I have seen slum conditions here and in Europe but the New York City slums now rate among the most dangerous in the world.

Behind the brick and wood facades of our old and new-law tenements lurks death, disease, pain, and frustration.

Fire is not the only terror to strike with increasing frequency at the city's tenement dwellers over the past two years. The menace of rat-bite has increased at a shocking pace.

More than 5,000 human beings were bitten by rats last year—an all-time record for the city. Most of the victims were babies. Since 1948, when the directive by Housing and Building Commissioner Gillroy transferred law enforcement from the Housing Division to the Borough Superintendents, these rat bites have more than doubled.

In that same period, as I have pointed out in earlier articles in this series, law enforcement has broken down in the city's tenements, and the average annual deaths by fire in these dwellings have been higher than in the 25-year period 1911-36 when city tenements were considered the country's worst death traps. The astounding increase in rat bites confirms this breakdown.

In 1948 this newspaper reported there had been 423 rat bites here in 1947—most of them were in Harlem. As a result of its campaign, Mayor O'Dwyer appointed a "rat control committee" consisting of the health, police, sanitation, fire, public works, and housing commissioners. A special "rodent control unit" was established in the Division of Housing and \$100,000 appropriated to get rid of rats. Twenty-two inspectors, seven clerks, and five typists were hired to fight the rats. The rats were not fazed. They continued biting babies at a bigger rate than ever.

In 1948, rat bites had increased by 20 percent over 1947 and in 1948 with 620 reported bites there was an increase of almost one-third over 1947. In 1950, rat bites increased by another 20 percent with 706 bites reported to the city.

Last year, however, the number of rat bites leaped by more than 35 percent with 977 cases reported. About 580 of these were in Manhattan alone, mostly in the Harlem area. There were 210 in Brooklyn.

Only one in five rat bites are hospital cases or serious enough to be reported, which brings the number of rat bites in this city to an all time high of 5,000.

Most of the victims are children like those incinerated last Wednesday in the Brooklyn tinder-box owned by Mrs. Bessie Honig where fire violations stood uncorrected for four years.



The rats enter the cribs or beds and gnaw at the remains of food on the children's fingers or mouths. With the breakdown of law enforcement garbage remains in the halls or dumbwaiter shafts supplying the rats with food increasing their population and sending them into the crowded apartments. Wide holes in the plaster serve as convenient rat thoroughfares. Exterminators have told me they have often taken out a barrelful from a single building.

The newest victims to be caught between the dangers of fire and vermin are the Puerto Rican and Negro population. With rents running \$65-\$80 monthly for a single room, sharing of apartments or stowing 10 people into one room has become common. Windowless cellars today are often considered a luxury.

Demand for living space has given rise to the new enterprise in which houses like Bessie Honig's death-trap on Bedford Avenue are purchased for a few thousand dollars down and made available to the home-hungry.

The high rents and the breakdown of law enforcement have made the new enterprises profitable. Hundreds of thousands of migrants who are pouring in from Puerto Rico and the South are the customers for whom everything with four walls and a roof is now being mustered into use.

The city's present housing program is not solving the problem of overcrowding though it could help if more public housing were built on vacant land.

But the city in recent years has adopted the policy of acquiring sites in overcrowded areas, tearing down the dwelling and thereby forcing these people into slums more crowded than those they previously occupied. Less than 20 percent of the evicted families ever find their way into the new public housing.

The borough president of Queens where most vacant sites are available has resisted public housing for his borough, forcing the City Housing Authority into its current program of slum acquisition and intensification of overcrowding,