

HOME CANDLE FIRES

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Executive Summary

During 2001, candles in U.S. homes caused an estimated 18,000 reported fires, 190 civilian deaths, 1,450 civilian injuries and \$265 million in estimated direct property damage. (Homes include one- and two-family dwellings, apartments and manufactured housing.)

Reported home candle fires rose 15% from 2000 to 2001, the latest year for which data is available. From 1980 to 1990, these fires had been falling, but they started climbing in 1991. Since 1995, every year has been a new high. The 18,000 reported in 2001 is more than three times the 5,500 reported in 1990. The number of fire deaths caused by candle fires also reached a new high in 2001.

Reported home fires have been decreasing while home candle fires have increased. Consequently, the share of home fires started by candles has also been growing. In 2001, candles caused 5% of reported home fires. Only 1% of home candle fires were caused by candles in the early 1980s.

During the three-year period of 1999-2001:

- Two-fifths (41%) of the home candle fires started in the bedroom, resulting in 24% of the associated deaths. The 17% of home candle fires that started in the living room, common room, or den caused 42% of the associated civilian fatalities.
- Candle fires start with a variety of items. A mattress or bedding was the item first ignited in 12% of the home candle fires and 26% of the home candle fire deaths. Cabinetry was first ignited in 10% of these fires, and 9% started when a curtain, blind or drapery ignited. Only 6% started with interior wall covering, but these fires caused 22% of the deaths. Five percent started with upholstered furniture, but these fires caused 13% of the home candle fire deaths.
- December had almost twice the number of home candle fires of an average month.
- Eleven percent of these fires started after someone fell asleep.

Factors contributing to ignition in 1999-2001:

- One-third (34%) of all home candle fires occurred after candles were left unattended, abandoned, or inadequately controlled.
- One-quarter (26%) occurred when some form of combustible material was left or came too close to the candle.
- Six percent were started by people (usually children) playing with the candle.

Ninety-one percent (91%) of all reported structure fires started by candles occurred in homes.

A special study of news clips and fire service reports about identified fatal home candle fires in 1997 and 1998 revealed that candles used for light in the absence of electrical power caused about one of every three of the studied fatal home candle fires. About one in four (24%) of the fatal home candle fires occurred in homes in which the power had been shut off. Seven percent (7%) of the fatal fires occurred during temporary power outages.

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