

(CBS) Just as kids head off to college, new government figures show on-campus fires almost doubling since 1998.

And that, says *The Early Show* consumer correspondent **Susan Koeppen**, is a big cause for concern for students and their parents.

Fire safety laws vary significantly from state-to-state, Koeppen reports. That's why experts say, if your child is leaving for school, fire prevention needs to be a top priority.

Dana Christmas knows that all too well.

When fire broke out in a dorm at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., Christmas, a resident assistant, tried desperately to get her students to safety, putting herself at risk.

"I'm knocking and I'm yelling and I'm screaming, 'It's a fire! Fire! Guys, get up! It's a fire. It's a real fire,'" Christmas said. "My scalp was on fire. My hair was burning. And my fingertips, they were on fire. They were burning."

It was Jan. 19, 2000, shortly after 4 a.m., when hundreds of students were forced to flee their residence hall. The fire started in a third-floor lounge, on the floor where Christmas was in charge.

"And no matter where you go, there's smoke," she recalled. "It's like you're living a nightmare. And you want to escape."

At that point, she still didn't run to try to save herself. She stayed behind to try to get other students out.

"(During) my last attempt to alert the residents of the fire, I collapsed on the floor," she said.

Burned over 60 percent of her body, Christmas was one of 58 students injured in the blaze. Three students died.

"Just to know that they suffered like that with the immense smoke and the fire and being engulfed in all the flames," Christmas said, "is just why I would like to see sprinklers installed throughout the entire nation."

Since then, Seton Hall has installed sprinklers, but many colleges still don't have them in their residence halls.

And that, Koeppen points out, can be cause for concern: According to the [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#), on-campus fires are on the rise, jumping from more than 1,800 in 1998 to nearly 3,300 in 2005.

"Students should know where the risks occur: in cooking, in smoking, in candles, and

overloaded power cords are really the places where the biggest risk of fire when kids go off to school," CPSC's Julie Vallese said.

With the help of FM Global, a large insurance company, **CBS News** witnessed firsthand just how important a sprinkler system can be in a dorm setting.

Also invited to the demonstration were representatives of more than 50 colleges and universities.

In FM Global's massive burn lab, engineers constructed two typical dorm rooms. Both were set on fire; one room had a sprinkler, the other didn't.

In the first test, a fire was started in a trash can filled with paper. One minute and 22 seconds later, the smoke alarm went off. At three minutes, a real fire was blazing. Four minutes into the blaze, the temperature approached 1,000 degrees. At four minutes and 41 seconds, flashover, and shortly after that, the windows blew out.

At that point, technicians stepped in to put out the blaze.

Dorm room No.1 was destroyed.

"We saw flames shoot out the door," FM Global's Dennis Waters said. "They went out a window. It was intense. It was very intense. We had temperatures of about 1,850 degrees on the ceiling during that fire test."

Anyone living in the dorm room would have had only minutes to escape. And the fire easily could have spread to other rooms.

Now, in the second test, a fire was started in a trash can in the dorm room with the sprinkler.

This time, the smoke alarm sounded at 51 seconds.

At one minute and 34 seconds, the sprinkler activated. Almost immediately, the room cleared of smoke and most of the flames were extinguished.

A fire continued in the corner, but the flames were contained by the sprinkler. The maximum temperature reached in this room was 305 degrees.

Waters said: "The difference, of course, is — this room was sprinklered."

And because of that, he says, the fire was contained.

Added Waters: "The fire was confined to that space and would not have gone anywhere but that space."

And the fire department would "absolutely" have gotten there in time, he notes. So, there's no question for parents that a room with a sprinkler is the one they would want for their kids.

Christmas says parents, students and lawmakers need to take fire safety on campus seriously.

"No one else deserves to be put in the situation that I have been in," she said. "Parents: Get active. Students: Get active. Don't put your life in the hands of someone else. If you can do something about it, take action now."

## **PREVENTION TIPS**

So, says Koeppen: Students and their parents must:

- Make sure rooms have working smoke detectors.

- Turn off all the electrical hardware they can, including kitchen equipment; blow out candles, and don't overload power cords.

- Know two ways to get out if there ever is a fire. That applies to both dorms and off-campus housing, because the majority of fire deaths occur off-campus.

Questions that should be asked of campus officials include:

- How many fires they have had on campus?

- Do residences have sprinklers?

- Do they offer fire safety training to their employees and students?

**For more resources, visit the Web sites of [Campus Firewatch](#) and [The Center for Campus Fire Safety](#).**

By [Robert Davis](#), USA TODAY

As students head to the nation's college campuses, relishing their new independence, criminal prosecutions in the deaths of two young men are a sober reminder of how quickly alcohol-fueled "fun" can spin out of control.

Charges were filed this month against students and administrators linked to the recent fire death of a 19-year-old sophomore at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., and the alcohol poisoning of a 18-year-old freshman at Rider University in Trenton, N.J.

USA TODAY last year examined 620 deaths of four-year college and university students dating back to Jan. 1, 2000, and found that alcohol was often a factor in several types of student deaths, ranging from fires to pranks to falls. Freshmen, often living away from home for the first time, are disproportionately vulnerable.

"Young people often come to college with ongoing alcohol habits," says Tim McDonough of the American Council on Education, which represents college officials. Colleges "are trying to educate and enforce and break habits already in place. These issues are tough, but college institutions have been working on them for a long time."

**A prank goes tragically out of control**

In Peoria, four college students face felony arson charges in the Aug. 12 death of their friend, Sheridan "Danny" Dahlquist. Three of the students — Nicholas Mentgen, 21, Ryan Johnson, 22, and David Crady, 19 — were Dahlquist's teammates on the Bradley University soccer team. The fourth student, Daniel Cox, 20, was visiting from Illinois Central College in East Peoria.

Illinois State Attorney Kevin Lyons says that after a night of drinking, Dahlquist went to bed in a house just off campus. As a joke, prosecutors say his friends slid two Roman candles — fireworks that shoot fireballs — under the bedroom door.

While as many as 16 balls of fire, each burning about 1,500 degrees, shot into the room, Lyons says, the men ran downstairs, hoping to see their friend emerge screaming in outrage at the prank.

As they stood in front of the house, however, all they saw was the bedroom window glow orange. They were prevented by the intense heat from rescuing Dahlquist, and a girl who was with them called 911, Lyons says. By the time help arrived, Dahlquist was dead of smoke inhalation.

Cox, Crady, Mentgen and Nicholas are charged with aggravated arson and possession of an explosive or incendiary device. Lyons says he "takes no delight in plucking four young men from their futures and putting them in a trial, but that is what fairness is about. ... I'm in the business of holding people accountable."

He says he could have charged the men with felony murder because the arson resulted in death, but he chose not to because the men didn't mean to kill their friend.

Jennifer Nelson, a graduate assistant at Seton Hall University's Campus Ministry who started a fire-safety program at the New Jersey school, says students don't understand how fast flames can spread.

Students who violate Seton safety rules, such as burning a candle in a room or failing to evacuate when a fire alarm sounds, are fined \$250, put on probation and forced to take the fire-safety class Nelson started with the South Orange Fire Department.

Some students roll their eyes when they arrive at the class, she says. Then she makes them read the USA TODAY stories and look at the faces on USATODAY.com of the students who have died in fires since 2000.

### **Hazing death leads to indictments**

In Trenton, three Rider University students and two administrators face criminal hazing charges after the March 30 death of freshman Gary DeVercelly. A grand jury found that a traditional fraternity ritual left DeVercelly dead from alcohol poisoning.

According to a release by Mercer County Prosecutor Joseph Bocchini Jr., DeVercelly and the pledges who participated in a March 28 fraternity initiation drank several shots and, in some cases, an entire bottle of alcohol in less than an hour. Most of the pledges were too young to drink legally, he said. DeVercelly died two days later.

Anthony Campbell, 51, dean of students, and Ada Badgley, 31, director of Greek Life, face aggravated hazing charges even though the university says they were not present at the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity.

Douglas Fierberg, a Washington, D.C., attorney who specializes in hazing law and is representing the DeVercelly family, says one of the indicted students was a university employee. Adriano DiDonato, 22, also charged with hazing and named by prosecutors as the residence director/house master of Phi Kappa Tau, was paid by the university and reports to Badgley, Fierberg says.

The grand jury also indicted the fraternity's pledge master, Dominic Olsen, 21, and its president Michael Tourney, 21.

Campbell and Badgley are on paid leave from the university, which formed a task force to look at alcohol issues on campus. McDonough says that many other colleges are reviewing safety measures. "Whenever there is an incident, no matter how small, they go back and revisit what they are doing," he says. "People are dedicated to keeping these campuses safe and healthy learning environments."

Jeffrey Parsons, a professor of psychology at New York's Hunter College who focuses on drug and alcohol addiction, says some students go wild and act crazy as they enjoy freedoms allowed by parents and universities, who are pointing fingers at each other.

Parents assume the colleges are enforcing drinking rules, he says, while school officials assume that parents have taught their children to behave responsibly.

Students feel free to take huge risks, he says. "They're not in an environment where somebody is patrolling their behavior."

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### [College students get firm warning on fire danger](#)

#### BY THE NUMBERS

Fires at off-campus student housing took more lives than on-campus fires.

#### **Student fire deaths (2000-2006)**

On campus: **8**  
Off campus: **54**

#### **Alcohol often has role**

In 59% of off-campus fires, at least one of the students killed was drinking.

#### **Weekends are deadliest**

#### **Student fire deaths off campus**

Saturday or Sunday: **63%**  
Monday to Friday: **37%**

#### **Time reported**

11 p.m. to 12:59 a.m.: **2%**  
1 to 2:59 a.m.: **13%**  
3 to 4:59 a.m.: **33%**  
5 to 6:59 a.m.: **41%**  
7 to 8:59 a.m.: **10%**

By [Robert Davis](#) and [Anthony DeBarros](#), USA TODAY  
COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Federal officials on Tuesday warned students moving to college to take steps to protect themselves from the rising number of fires on and near campuses.

"The risk of fire in college housing is greater than in housing used in the general population," says Nancy Nord, acting chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Risky behavior, such as drinking alcohol, can contribute to the danger, she says. She suggests students pack their "safety smarts."

At a media briefing on the University of Maryland campus, officials released a new National Fire Protection Association report that cites an increase in college housing fires: 3,300 in 2005, up from 1,800 in 1998. From 2002 through 2005, there were 39 deaths and about 400 injuries in dormitories, fraternities, sororities and barracks as a result of fires.

But the report, which was based on estimates from two national databases, did not include off-campus fires. USA TODAY reported last year that off-campus fires were the most deadly.

No agency tracks this area, officials say. As a result, two University of Maryland students who died in separate fires the past two years less than a mile away from Tuesday's briefing are not included in the report.

Fire prevention efforts have helped to save lives on campus, and college students are at greater risk when they move off campus away from school safety programs, federal officials say.

"Deaths and injuries in on-campus housing may be just a fraction of the fires that affect college students," Nord says, citing media reports. "Off-campus fires may be the leading source of death and injury to college students."

Alan Sactor, the University of Maryland's fire marshal, says that since the 1970s, the school has been assisted by local fire officials in inspecting the off-campus fraternity and sorority houses to "keep our hand in it." But "off-campus apartments are a very difficult issue. I don't think there are any good answers on that yet."

So students and parents are encouraged to take a more active role. Gregory Cade, U.S. fire administrator at the Department of Homeland Security, says they should look for sprinkler systems, working smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and two exits from every bedroom.

"Proactive measures at any level of life are likely to evolve into preventative acts," says Rick Yandoli of Greenwich, Conn., who was visiting the campus with his daughter, a prospective student.

Ed Comeau, publisher of Campus Firewatch, which tracks campus-related fire deaths, says many people must work to protect students.

"It is a shared responsibility among the school, the community, the student and the parents," he says. "However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the students."

*Davis reported from College Park; DeBarros reported from McLean, Va.*