

**WHERE THERE'S  
SMOKING,  
THERE'S FIRE**



**MASSPIRG**

**NOVEMBER 2001**

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## **A Study of Fires Caused by Cigarettes**

By

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[www.masspirg.org](http://www.masspirg.org)

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## MASSPIRG's Study of Fires Caused by Cigarettes

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### SUMMARY:

Across the nation, over 1,000 people are killed and 3,000 injured as a result of cigarette fires each year. These fires cause more than \$400 million in property damage.

In Massachusetts alone in 2000, 1,280 fires were attributed to cigarettes. Those fires killed 17 people, injured 81 civilians, and wounded 61 firefighters in the line of duty. Insurers and property owners lost over \$9.3 million due to the same blazes. Despite igniting 5% of the 24,931 reported fires in 2000, cigarette fires killed 17 civilians, or 22% of all civilian fires deaths

Some recent tragic fires started by cigarettes include:

- The day after Christmas, 2000 a Fall River fire destroyed two homes, damaged four other buildings, injured two, and killed a 24-year old woman.
- On January 23, 2001 the Ipswich Fire Department was called to battle a fire that killed a 33-year old woman and her two daughters, ages three years and five months.
- On February 17, 2001 the Westborough Fire Department was called to a six-alarm fire in an apartment building. By the time the fire was out, 400 families were homeless and \$1.5 million of property had been damaged.

The real tragedy is that many of these cigarette-started blazes were preventable. For decades, the tobacco industry has had available the technology to make less incendiary cigarettes that extinguish themselves when not being actively smoked.

Armed with the new information in this report, MASSPIRG urges Massachusetts to join New York to mandate all cigarettes sold in the Commonwealth meet basic fire safety standards.

## MASSACHUSETTS DATA:

In November, 2000, the Massachusetts Senate Committee on Post Audit and Oversight released “A Smoldering Issue: Creating Fire Safety Standards for Cigarettes.” In their report, they analyzed cigarette-ignited fires in the Commonwealth in the years 1990-99. “Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire,” updates the Committee’s report with data for 2000 and projections for the coming years.

### Key Findings:

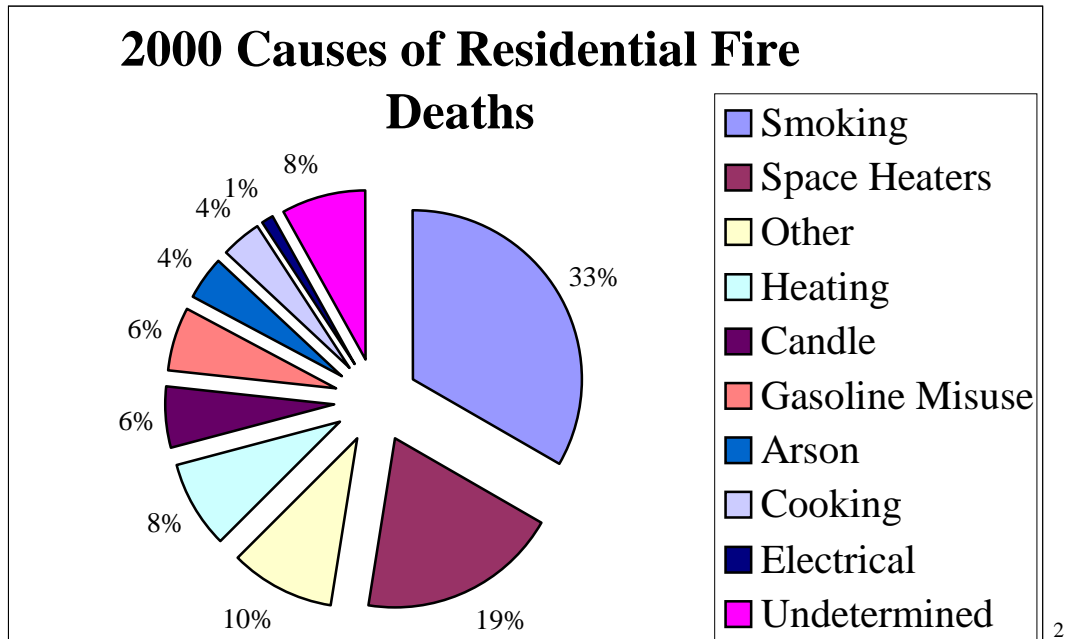
- Despite igniting 5% of the 24,931 reported fires in 2000, cigarette fires killed 17 civilians, or 22% of all civilian fires deaths.
- Even though the number of fires went down in 2000, firefighter injuries maintained their five-year high, civilian injuries reached a new six-year high, and deaths reached a new four-year high.
- Over the last 11 years, cigarettes have caused nearly 15,000 fires.

<b>Cigarette Ignited Fires<sup>1</sup></b>					
<b>Year</b>	<b># of Fires</b>	<b>FF Injuries</b>	<b>Civilian Injuries</b>	<b>Deaths</b>	<b>Dollar Loss</b>
1990	1,338	67	96	24	\$ 6,758,211
1991	1,465	83	94	19	\$ 6,096,550
1992	1,293	64	84	14	\$ 6,869,492
1993	1,335	109	86	21	\$ 7,339,540
1994	1,377	87	83	27	\$ 7,046,702
1995	1,499	67	73	16	\$ 7,342,088
1996	1,175	59	73	25	\$ 5,419,172
1997	1,349	39	51	9	\$ 4,596,420
1998	1,261	41	74	13	\$ 7,202,120
1999	1,607	61	49	10	\$ 16,918,733
<b>2000</b>	<b>1,280</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>\$ 9,331,613</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,979</b>	<b>738</b>	<b>844</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>\$ 84,920,641</b>
<b>Annual Average</b>	<b>1,362</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>\$ 7,720,058</b>

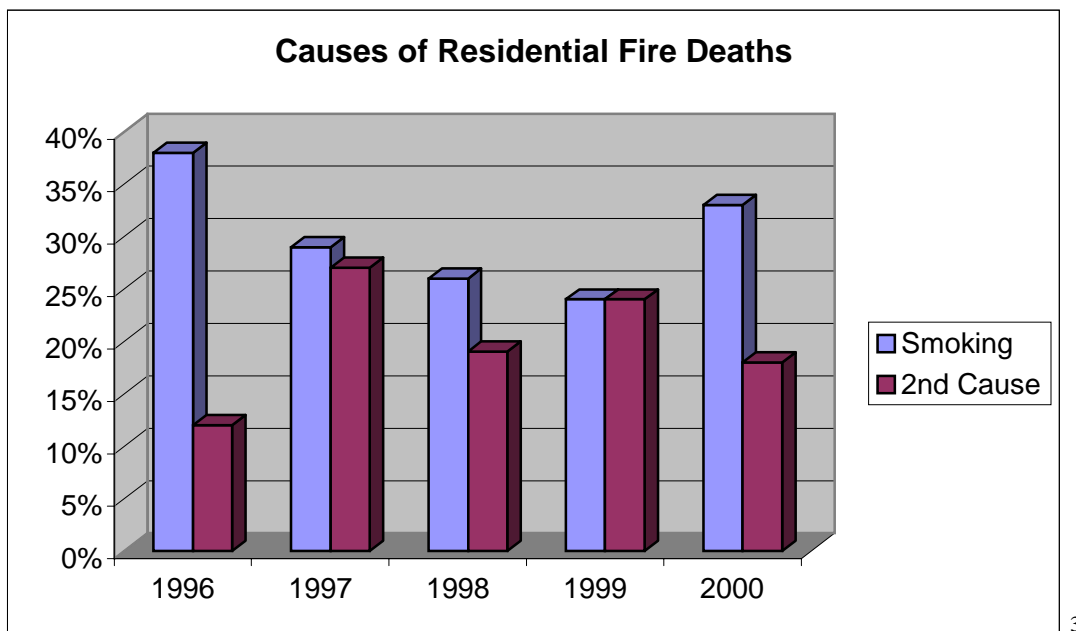
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<sup>1</sup> Office of the State Fire Marshal. Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System. 2000.

Cigarettes, by far, were the leading cause of fatal residential fires. As a source of fatal fires in 2000, smoking nearly doubled the second place cause (space heaters) and more than tripled the third-place cause.



The 2000 findings continue the trend of cigarettes as the leading cause of fatal residential fires. In every year, the second most common cause was cooking, except 1997 and 2000, when it was electrical and space heaters, respectively.



<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

## TECHNOLOGY:

The best way to stop cigarettes from accidentally starting fires is to make them unable to do so. The technology exists, and has existed since the 1980s, to make cigarettes self-extinguishing. In other words, a cigarette need not continue to smolder until it is burned up; cigarettes can be made to go out when not being actively smoked.

Cigarettes can be made to self extinguish through a variety of cigarette manufacturing techniques. If the tobacco is packed more loosely, the cigarette is less likely to continue to burn. Cigarettes with long filters and less porous paper reduce the air flow to a cigarette, also making it less likely to smolder. Several cigarette brands – Merit, Eve Lights, More, Virginia Slims, and Capri – already produce less incendiary cigarettes. It seems only logical to enhance the safety of all by requiring that each cigarette meet basic fire safety standards.

## SOLUTION:

Cars are equipped with seat belts, proper bumpers, and a slew of other safety features. Toys are made to ensure that they do not pose choking hazards. Lighters are required to have simple safety locks and halogen lamps turn off automatically if they get too hot. All of these basic product safety measures save lives. Manufacturers are required to make their products safe and minimize harm.

The tobacco industry must be held to the same basic consumer product safety principles. The technology to create less incendiary cigarettes exists today. Considering that cigarettes are the leading cause of fatal residential fires, cigarette manufacturers should be required to make their cigarettes less incendiary before anyone else is injured or killed.

New York passed its own self-extinguishing cigarette law in 2000, set to go into effect in 2003. Massachusetts should continue the trend. The Moakley Bill (Senate Bill 1916, named for the late US Representative Joseph Moakley, who pushed for this type of legislation on the federal level), filed by Senator Cheryl Jacques and Representative Rachel Kaprielian and co-sponsored by 51 other lawmakers, is the way to do it. The Moakley Bill requires all cigarettes sold in Massachusetts to meet standards for fire safety as developed by the Department of Public Health. Under the bill, cigarette manufacturers must also certify that less-incendiary cigarettes are no more toxic than current brands. The Moakley Bill will drastically reduce the number of fires ignited by cigarettes and save lives.

If SB 1916 is not passed – if cigarette manufacturers are not required to meet basic fire safety standards – than a repetition of the same tragedies will continue year after year. That means an additional yearly 1,362 fires, 67 injured firefighters, 80 hurt civilians, 18 more tragic deaths, and \$7.7 million lost. If ever there were a time for lightening the load on our firefighters and protecting the public, now is the moment.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*