

ARSON

by

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According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation the United States has the highest rate of arson in the world, and it is one of the fastest growing crimes. One investigator from the National Fire Protection Association stated, " Arson is a way of lashing out resentment for the environment in which people find themselves." This, of course, is one of the reasons it is so prevalent. Arson is seen as a low priority crime, so many arsons go unpunished or even unknown. There are many different behaviors and situations that bring on an arsonists attack, because of this it is a hard crime to pinpoint and prevent (Bozza, 1978, p. 3).

What is Arson?

Arson is the willful and malicious burning of property. The criminal act of arson is divided into three elements (Douglas, 1997, p.164).

- 1.) There is a burning of property. This must be shown in court to be actual destruction, at least in part, not just scorching or sooting.
- 2.) The fire must have been intentionally set. Proof must be established by evidence, either through specific forensic findings or by expert testimony that all possible natural or accidental causes have been considered and eliminated.
- 3.) The fire has to be proved to have been started with malice.

Arsonists: General characteristics

To understand the general characteristics of an arson there are two key words that are important. The first is incendiary devices. These consist of what actually started the fire such as initiators, timing devices, candles, or electronic timers. The other term is accelerant. An accerlerant is something that causes the actual burning; such as gasoline, lighter fluid, or mixtures of the two. Forensic scientists have noted that there are generally two different types of arsonists (Nickel, 1999, p.231-232).

- 1.) Organized arsonists

- elaborate incendiary devices (electronic timing mechanisms, or initiators

- less physical evidence; if forced entry, it's skillful
- methodical approach (excessive accelerant use and a pattern in the attacks)

2.) Disorganized Arsonist

- tend to use the materials at hand
- they use more common accelerants such as gasoline
- more physical evidence left (footprints, finger prints, etc..)

Different types of Arson

- Vandalism-Motivated Arson- Vandalism motivated arson is due to malicious and mischievous motivation that results in destruction and damage. Vandalism motivated arson is most often done out of mischief or because of peer pressure. Educational facilities, residential areas, grass, brush, woodland, and timber are most often the targets of vandalism motivated arsonists. This type of arson often involves multiple offenders who act spontaneously and impulsively. The typical crime scene is of the disorganized sort, where much evidence is left and materials to start the fire are often present at the site. The typical offender of vandalism-motivated arson is a young male between the ages of seven through nine years old, who flees the scene and rarely ever witnesses the fire they set (Wooden, 1984, p.8-9).

- Excitement-Motivated Arson- This type of arson is done because of a craving for excitement that is satisfied by firesetting. This offender rarely intends to harm people. The types of arsonists in this category are the thrill seeker, attention seeker, and the ones that do it for sexual gratification. Dumpsters, vegetation, construction sites, and residential property are all common targets. Most often the offender picks a target where they can easily watch the fire they set. Both lone and multiple offenders are common to this type of arson (Wooden, 1984, p.10).

- Revenge-Motivated Arson- This type of fire is set in correlation with some injustice done to the arsonist, whether it is real or imagined. This type may be a well planned one time event or the work of a serial arsonist taking out frustrations on society as a whole. The type of revenge in this category may be social, personal, institutional, or group retaliation such as against gangs. Examples of conflict that result in the arsonists attack are lover's triangles, landlord/tenant relationships, and employer/employee relationships. Female's involved in the ex-lover revenge fires usually tend to target something of significance to the victim, such a vehicle or clothing. They also tend to start the fire with the victims clothes or other personal effects. Other offenders may retaliate against churches, government facilities, universities, or corporations (Douglas, 1997, p. 173).

- Crime Concealment-Motivated Arson- In this category arson is the secondary criminal activity, it is committed with the purpose of covering up the primary crime. The primary

crimes most often include suicide, breaking and entering, embezzlement, larceny, and murder. In this type of arson the target is dependent on what is being concealed but is most often a business, residence, or a vehicle (Douglas, 1997, p. 176-177).

- Profit Motivated Arson- Arson for profit is when a fire is set with the purpose of making a material gain. This one is a commercial crime and exhibits less passion than the rest of the crimes. This type of arson can be used many different ways including; fraud to collect insurance, fraud to liquidate property, fraud to dissolve business, fraud to liquidate property, fraud to dissolve business, fraud to conceal loss or liquidate inventory, employment, parcel clearance, and competition. The property targeted by this type of arson varies but is usually business related properties. This type of crime is almost always well planned and methodical, and the crime scene demonstrates a more organized style because it contains less physical evidence that would identify the offender. It also involves more sophisticated incendiary devices, and if a residence is the target, items of value are sometimes removed (Douglas, 1997, p.180).

- Extremist-Motivated Arson- Extremist motivated arson is committed to further a social, political, or religious cause. The types of arson in the category are terrorism, discrimination, and riots/civil disturbance. The property that is targeted usually represents what the offenders believe is. Examples are laboratories, slaughter houses, fur stores and abortion clinics, religious institutions targeted by individuals with different beliefs, and individuals targeted by political extremist organizations who want to intimidate racial, religious, or political opponents. The crime scene is almost always organized, and often there is some sort of message left by the perpetrators in hopes of media coverage (Douglas, 1997, p. 184).

- Serial Arson- These are arsonists who set fires repeatedly. A serial arsonist is involved in three or more separate firesetting episodes with the characteristic emotional cooling-off period between fires. This is the most dangerous type of arson because of the random selection of the victims. The choice of targets is also random, but they are often unoccupied or abandoned property during night time hours. The crime scene is often disorganized and there is usually physical evidence present. Usually the offender does his work alone.

- Spree and Mass Arson- A spree arsonist sets fires at three or more separate locations with no emotional cooling-off period between them. Mass arson involves one offender who sets three or more fires at the same location during a limited period of time. An example is an offender who sets a fire on every floor on a multi-story building (Douglas, 1997, p. 186-189).

Investigating Arson

There is a low rate of fire investigation due to two factors. The first one is that no other crime scene besides a bombing contains so much destruction and disorder as arson. The investigator often has to search through rubble, which is often covered in water and foam from extinguishing the fire earlier. On top of that the scene is often dangerous. There is

also the problem of police and fire fighters jurisdiction. Historically, the police have viewed arson as a fire problem, but fire fighters argue that it is a police problem because they are not trained investigators. Smaller communities that don't have special arson units usually give the fire department the responsibility of investigating the cause of the fire, and of arson detection. They then give the police department the responsibility for criminal investigation and the apprehension of a suspect (Monk, 2001, p. 87).

The first step in a fire investigation is for the investigator to confer with fire fighters on the scene about smoke color, odor, size of flame, and other important information they can't determine after the fire has been put out. The first fire fighters on the scene are saddled with the responsibility of recalling everything about the fire including the behavior of persons around the scene. Other items it is important to investigate when trying to decide whether it was arson or not is the presence of foreign materials that may accelerate the fire's speed and tracks and foot prints around the scene. The investigator also documents the arson scene through photographs and measurements and sketches, with this information they can reconstruct the sequence of the fire back to its beginning. Arsonists most often use connecting devices between fires such as chemicals, timing devices, or flammable liquids. By focusing on the incendiary devices the investigator can tell how the fire was started and consequently whether or not it was intentionally set (Walker, 1987, p. 123).

Statistics

Arson statistics in the United States are collected by the National Fire Protection Agency and also by the FBI as part of its Uniform Crime Report. Both established arsons and suspicious fires are combined in its statistics. Although inconsistent reporting of arsons leaves us short of a true picture of the problem certain trends can be found (Englund, 1983, p. 45). According to the NFPA arson is consistently responsible for 13-14 percent of all structure fires. In 1990 38% of all arsons were by people under the age of eighteen. Males comprised 87% of all arson arrestees, 75% of those arrested were white while the rest were black or other minorities (Douglas, 1997, p. 163).

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