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OJJDP Update on Research

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NCJRS

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A Look at Juvenile Firesetter Programs

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ACQUISITIONS

by Rebekah K. Hersch

In Passaic, New Jersey, a firefighter was killed and hundreds of people lost their homes in a fire started by a group of teenage boys. In Roanoke, Virginia, a 7-year-old boy set fire to a chair in an abandoned building. The fire spread to an adjacent house and trapped an elderly woman. In Rochester, New York, a 2-year-old, playing with matches, started a fire that took his life and the lives of five family members.

Unfortunately, these tragic events are not isolated incidents, but are repeated virtually every day in cities across the United States. It is estimated that approximately 40 percent of all arsons

are set by juveniles, causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damages annually and untold suffering from injuries and deaths. The problem of juvenile firesetting is not limited to any particular region or group of juveniles. For example:

- Juveniles are responsible for approximately 50 percent of the arson fires in Seattle.
- Data from a 42-month study in Rochester, New York, indicates that 38 percent of children in grades 1-8 admit playing with fire.
- In 1986, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, juveniles between the ages of 13 and 17 ac-

counted for 26.6 percent of the arson arrests nationwide.

Realizing the seriousness of the juvenile firesetting problem, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in conjunction with the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is sponsoring a National Juvenile Firesetter/Arson Control and Prevention Program. It is being conducted by the Institute for Social Analysis (ISA) and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). This development program will assess, develop, test, and disseminate information about promising approaches for the control and prevention of juvenile firesetting and arson.

From the Administrator:

In recent years, juvenile and adolescent firesetters have accounted for a substantial number of arson arrests throughout the United States. The fires for which these juveniles are arrested have profound psychological and economic effects on their communities.

Despite the seriousness of juvenile firesetting and arson, little is known about programs that are available to prevent or control these problems.

To remedy this, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and

the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) have funded a program to assess and develop promising approaches to help communities deal with juvenile firesetting and arson.

During the first phase of this program, researchers examined the extent of juvenile firesetting and selected intervention programs. The results, which are discussed in this OJJDP Update, indicate that intervention programs can successfully combat juvenile arson and firesetting.

However, the assessment also found that juvenile firesetter programs seldom have formal agreements or working relationships with various components of the justice

system, such as law enforcement, prosecutors, or the courts. Such relationships are necessary to ensure adequate tracking of all juvenile firesetters.

During the next year, OJJDP and USFA will develop and test model programs that include coordination and other elements of successful firesetter programs. In the meantime, we believe the findings discussed in this OJJDP Update can help practitioners and policy-makers address juvenile arson and firesetting in their communities.

Diane M. Munson
Acting Administrator

The 2-year program, which began in early 1988, is divided into four incremental stages:

1. An assessment of the incidence and dynamics of juvenile firesetting/arson and selected juvenile firesetter programs throughout the United States.
2. The comprehensive documentation of model approaches to controlling juvenile firesetting/arson, including descriptions of program development, implementation, and operation.
3. The development of training and technical assistance packages to provide local jurisdictions with the necessary information to implement programs.
4. Testing and dissemination of the training and technical assistance packages.

Following the development of training and technical assistance, juvenile arson program prototypes will be tested in selected jurisdictions.

ISA will be assisted during the development project by the National Juvenile Firesetter/Arson Partnership, a group of individuals from both the public and private sectors who have a special expertise and interest in juvenile arson. The partnership recently held its first meeting in Washington. (Partnership members are listed on the back page.)

This *OJJDP Update* presents the results from the first phase of this project—the assessment of the problem of juvenile firesetting and selected intervention programs.

Juvenile firesetting and arson behavior defined

Firesetting includes a wide range of behaviors in children—from the preschooler who lights a fire out of curiosity to malicious teenagers who set fires in their schools. Although the more serious behaviors, those labeled arson, often inspire the most concern,

past research shows that approximately 50 percent of the fires set by children are set out of curiosity or ignorance, not malice. Indeed many of the juvenile firesetter programs surveyed for this study target the less disturbed curiosity firesetter. To understand the problem of juvenile firesetting or arson, one must first understand the range of juvenile behaviors that constitute firesetting.

Juvenile firesetting and arson are often considered antisocial behaviors. However, Dr. Jessica Gaynor, an expert in the field of juvenile firesetting and a consultant on the OJJDP arson project, notes that firestarting in and of itself is not necessarily abnormal behavior. In her book, *The Psychology of Child Firestarting: Detection and Intervention*, coauthored by Chris Hatcher, Gaynor states that there are a number of firesetting behaviors that represent a natural developmental sequence in the lives of most children. The issue becomes one of distinguishing age-appropriate fire-related behaviors from abnormal behaviors. Fire is a fascinating phenomenon for young children, and a child's interest in fire and subsequent use of fire falls into categories that describe appropriate and inappropriate firesetting behaviors. These categories also provide an understanding of how these behaviors develop in children.

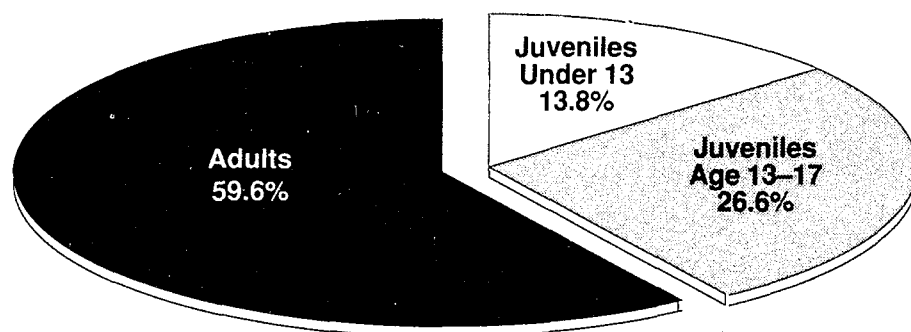
The four categories of juvenile fire-related behaviors—fire interest, fireplay, firesetting, and arson—can be viewed as a continuum representing increasing levels of involvement with fire. Individual characteristics, social circumstances, and environment all influence the development of age-appropriate, fire-safe behaviors or fire-risk behaviors. In a normal age-appropriate sequence, children learn to handle their interest in and use of fire competently in a supervised setting. In some cases, however, certain negative environmental/social conditions such as abuse or neglect, or individual problems may lead youth to engage in pathological firesetting and arson behaviors.

Fire interest. A child's interest in fire can begin as early as age 3 and may continue until age 6 or 7. Fire interest is typically observed in young boys, although girls may also express interest. Children usually express this interest by asking questions about fire, incorporating fire-related objects, such as fire engines, into their play, or asking permission to participate in supervised activities that involve fire, such as lighting a barbecue grill. Supervised experience in fire-related activities teaches children how to engage in fire-safe behaviors and reduces their chance of involvement in pathological firesetting.

Fireplay. Fireplay occurs when unsupervised children experiment with matches or other fire-starting materials. The majority of these children are boys between the ages of 5 and 10 who are motivated by curiosity and experimentation. Their fires are unintentional and once they start a fire, they make serious attempts to extinguish the fire or go for help. Although unintentional, these fires have great destructive potential because they are usually set in the child's home and the child cannot handle the fire once it spreads. Early recognition and detection of fireplay behavior coupled with appropriate remedial steps can reduce the risk of future firestarting incidents.

Firesetting. Pathological firesetting, as distinguished from fireplay, is an intentional, nonproductive fire start. The majority of the youths involved in firesetting are males between 7 and 18 years old. Unlike children involved in fireplay, these youths actively seek fire-starting materials, such as matches and lighters, and ignite papers, leaves, trash, or personal property. Firesetting can be motivated by a number of reasons, including psychological pain, anger, revenge, the need for attention, malicious mischief, or excitement. Firesetters and their families require immediate attention to prevent a recurrence of firesetting behavior.

1986 Arson Arrests



1986 FBI Uniform Crime Report

There are a number of effective interventions to stop firesetting and resolve the underlying problems. These intervention programs, which are often operated by fire service or mental health agencies, will be discussed in the next section.

Arson. Although the legal definitions of arson vary from State to State, most define the felony of arson as the *malicious* and *willful* burning of any structure, forest land, or property. Youth who start fires that warrant firefighting intervention and result in significant property damage or personal injury are often the subjects of arson investigations. If the fire was the result of a willful intent to destroy and the youth has reached the age of accountability, then it is likely that the youth will be charged with arson.

Juvenile firesetter programs

Ten years ago, few programs existed to address the problem of juvenile firesetting. During the last decade, however, hundreds of programs have been established across the Nation. These programs are housed primarily within the fire service—i.e., the fire marshal's office, fire department, fire prevention bureau, or arson investigation office. Most of these programs are

designed to identify, evaluate, and treat the juvenile firesetter to prevent a recurrence of the firesetting. Early programs, developed by local professionals and fire service officials, represented grassroots approaches to the problem. Many of the more recently established programs have been aided by Federal efforts, and have been based on models developed by the U.S. Fire Administration.

To assess the nature and effectiveness of these programs, ISA recently surveyed 158 juvenile firesetter programs around the country. The survey included questions about program goals and services, target audience, and the number of juveniles served. Seventy programs responded to the survey and 33 of the more promising programs were selected for indepth surveys, designed to explore the programs' unique characteristics. These programs represent a broad range of experience, size, geographic location, target audience, and program strategy. To complete the assessment of juvenile firesetter programs, ISA also conducted 2-day site visits to 13 of the promising programs. The results of the assessment surveys and site visits revealed that juvenile firesetter programs demonstrate both numerous similarities and significant variations.

These programs are administered and staffed primarily by the fire service, and

also have similar program strategies. Program personnel include firefighters, fire investigators, fire marshals, and fire safety educators. Programs may also use trained counselors and volunteers, and include combinations of assessment, intervention, counseling, and referral. Each of these components is described below.

Assessment. The majority of the juvenile firesetting programs attempt to determine the motives behind the firesetting incident and the juvenile's risk for future firesetting. Formal assessments include structured interviews, often using USFA procedures, with the firesetters and their parents. Juveniles and parents are questioned about the firesetting incident and any previous incidents, the youth's home environment, and the extent to which the youth exhibits problem behavior. Using USFA criteria, youth firesetting risk is categorized as "little concern," "definite concern," and "extreme concern." As noted earlier, juvenile firesetter programs most often serve children in the first category. These younger, "curiosity" firesetters do not show any serious pathology or delinquent behavior and usually receive fire safety education. More troubled youth, those at definite or extreme risk for firesetting, are usually referred for counseling.

Intervention. Although the interventions provided depend on the firesetters referred, almost all the programs provide some fire safety education. These education programs, often geared to younger children, focus on such topics as the elements of fire, the use of fire as a tool, how to plan fire escape routes, and how to conduct home fire inspections. Programs may also provide fire safety education to the parents of firesetters. These programs teach parents fire prevention strategies and educate them on the symptoms of firesetting.

More serious firesetters may also be required to provide some form of restitution. In some cases the restitution is directly related to the youth's fireset-

ting incident. For example, youth may be asked to repair property damaged in the fire. Program personnel believe these activities have a more significant impact on the firesetting youth than monetary restitution or general community service.

Counseling. If counseling is needed, programs generally refer the youth to professional counseling or therapy sessions. However, a few juvenile firesetter programs, most notably those in Dallas and Houston, go beyond fire safety education to provide more indepth counseling. These programs, using a technique developed by Dr. Eugene Bumpass, teach firesetters how to express the negative feelings underlying the firesetting behavior. Dr. Bumpass is a noted psychiatrist who has worked with youthful firesetters for 15 years. His Interview Graphing Technique asks youth to describe the fire incident, events preceding it, and activities immediately following it. The events are plotted on the horizontal axis of a graph. Youth are then asked to indicate the extent to which they felt happy, sad, angry, and scared during each event. The youth's feelings are color-coded and plotted on the vertical axis. Alternate behaviors are also listed on the graph. Firesetters are taught to identify the feelings associated with firesetting and use those feelings as signals to change behavior. The goal of the program is to stop the firesetting behavior, not provide indepth mental health counseling. Firesetters in need of such counseling are often referred to appropriate agencies.

Referral. Nearly all the programs refer troubled firesetters to one of a number of agencies. Juvenile firesetters are most often referred to mental health agencies for counseling, but may also be referred to social service agencies or the justice system. Mental health counselors usually work with firesetters and their families to resolve issues surrounding a child's firesetting behavior. Families are involved in counseling

because the home environment is frequently a key factor in the firesetting behavior.

Variations and gaps in existing juvenile arson programs

Virtually all the programs visited by ISA contained the central services described above. However, the programs exhibited considerable variations in their methods and effectiveness. For example, programs differed in the effectiveness of their working relationships with other community agencies. The number and range of referrals from outside the fire service and the effectiveness of referrals to other agencies depend largely on how links among agencies were established. Few

the FRY program to confirm compliance with their referrals.

These differences in the programs' relationships with other agencies are perhaps clearest in the justice system. Although juvenile firesetter programs may have relationships with one justice agency (e.g., police, prosecution, court) seldom are there the formal agreements and working relationships throughout the justice system that are needed to ensure adequate tracking of all juvenile firesetters. Juvenile firesetter programs tend to concentrate on young firesetters who are not involved in other delinquent behaviors, while the juvenile justice system tends to deal with the older, more serious arsonist. Procedures in many programs preclude agencies from referring firesetters to these programs if they are being adjudicated. Although it

“Although juvenile firesetter programs may have relationships with one justice agency . . . seldom are there the formal agreements and working relationships throughout the justice system . . .”

programs have involved all the relevant agencies and officials in comprehensive planning sessions to win their support from the outset and establish specific responsibilities. One program that established strong relationships with key agencies is the Fire Related Youth (FRY) program in Rochester, New York. Investigators from the FRY program met with representatives from mental health agencies, child protective services, probation, and juvenile justice to develop referral procedures. As a result of their efforts, the FRY investigators have standard procedures for referring juveniles to the necessary services. These procedures include dual waivers that allow the agencies to share information about the juvenile and allow

is clear that juvenile arsonists should be handled by the justice system, there appears to be no reason why the older delinquent arsonist should be excluded from the juvenile firesetter programs. These programs can examine the problems of all firesetters, including the delinquent arsonist, if only for assessment and tracking purposes.

Some juvenile firesetter programs receive referrals from the juvenile court. In some cases, the court may require a juvenile to participate in the program as a condition of probation or in lieu of prosecution. In other cases, juveniles found guilty of a fire-related crime may be put on probation, referred for counseling, or sentenced to a detention or correctional facility.

There is very little information about court-based or correctional facility-based firesetter programs. The question of what happens to firesetters sentenced to youth correctional facilities needs to be investigated further. To help ISA gather such information, OJJDP will include a question in its Children In Custody survey on whether detention and correctional facilities (including halfway houses, State schools, and juvenile correctional facilities) have a juvenile firesetter program. Results of the survey will be available in early 1990.

Programs also differ in their community outreach efforts. Many programs rely solely on the fire service for their referrals, but some, such as those in Upper Arlington and Columbus, Ohio, developed successful public education campaigns. These media campaigns, which often include public service announcements, produce a significant number of parental referrals. Many programs also extend their prevention efforts by providing primary prevention education in the elementary schools. General fire safety education may be incorporated into existing curriculums or presented in special fire education classes by fire service personnel. The school fire education classes also make these institutions aware of the juvenile firesetter program and often lead to referrals from the schools.

Finally, juvenile firesetter programs vary in the types of intervention services they provide. As noted earlier, nearly all the programs provide fire safety education to the juvenile firesetter. However, the nature of the education and the way it is provided differ considerably. Fire safety education is often taught by firefighters or fire prevention staff in sessions that may range from a few hours to several days. The more comprehensive educational interventions often include homework assignments for the youth and the family, and use a wide variety of materials, including brochures, comic books, movies, and games.

A number of programs also pair youth with firefighters. This approach, based on the Firehawk Foundation model, resembles the Big Brother/Big Sister program. The firefighters serve as role models for youth, primarily boys, who need attention and guidance. Unfortunately, there are often more youth in need of a "buddy" than there are fire fighters available in the program.

Program effectiveness

According to site surveys, most programs report very low recidivism rates, usually less than 5 percent, and several sites also report significant, often dramatic reductions in the number of fires set by juveniles after the establishment of the juvenile firesetter program. However, solid data on program effectiveness are scarce because so few programs have the resources to maintain accurate followup statistics and even fewer have been the subject of rigorous program evaluations. Nevertheless, the promising findings reported by the programs seem plausible given that, for the large majority of these youth, firesetting does not stem from deeply rooted pathology, but is a problem behavior that can be corrected with a combination of education and counseling. To the extent that the juvenile firesetter programs follow the practices highlighted in the literature, these programs potentially could be one of the rare breed of limited, low-cost interventions that can have significant impact on the problem.

Developing improved juvenile firesetter programs

The ISA assessment of juvenile firesetter programs across the Nation has provided ample evidence of their ability to combat a damaging problem. The assessment has also documented the following key elements that contribute to a program's success:

- **Careful planning and coordination** between the program and other agencies and institutions.
- **A public awareness education campaign** to inform the general public about the juvenile arson problem and the program services.
- **Accurate screening and evaluation procedures** for assessing the nature of the firesetter's problem and the appropriate intervention.
- **A comprehensive range of services** that includes both prevention and intervention.
- **A broad and efficient referral system** between the program and other agencies in the community.
- **An effective case monitoring system** for tracking the disposition of juvenile firesetter cases and recidivism rates.

Although many existing juvenile firesetter programs display one or more of these components, few (if any) programs have fully developed all of them. During the next year, OJJDP, through ISA, will develop and test prototype technical assistance and training materials designed to permit any jurisdiction to launch a full and effective juvenile arson prevention and control program.

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The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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