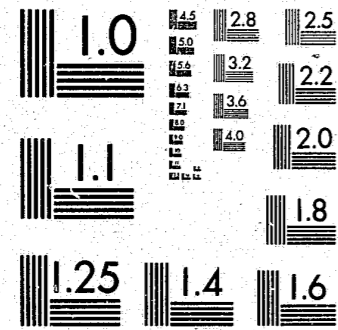


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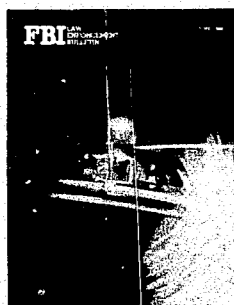
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**The Cover:**  
In the early morning hours, Detroit, Mich., police officers respond to the radio call, "Shooting in progress, officer involved. . ."  
(Photo courtesy Officer Alan Halstead)

**Federal Bureau of Investigation  
United States Department of Justice  
Washington, D.C. 20535**

**William H. Webster, Director**

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68373  
Crime Problems

# THE FIRESETTER A Psychological Profile (Part 1)

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Photo credit John Mongillo

The psychiatric study of firesetting reveals that such behavior "represents the means of dealing with or giving expression to deeper emotional conflicts."<sup>1</sup> It has been identified by some clinical researchers as an early warning sign or predictor of possible future violent, criminal, or even homicidal behavior in children. Firesetting has also been associated with repressed hostility, aggressiveness and destructive tendencies, sadism, sexual immaturity, urethral eroticism, and pathological revenge.

Understanding the psychological aspects of firesetting is essential to the control and deterrence of arson. Thus, knowing the arsonist's psychodynamics can be an invaluable aid to the investigator. It assists him in focusing his investigation, identifying potential suspects, and developing appropriate techniques and strategies for interviewing the various types of firesetters.

#### **Arson: A National Epidemic**

Arson, the willful and malicious burning of property, is "one of the nation's most serious human-made disasters,"<sup>2</sup> according to John W. Macy, Jr., Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It has also become one of the most prodigious, devastating, and expensive forms of criminal behavior perpetrated against society.

Until recently, arson has drawn little attention as a national priority. Since it has been generally viewed in the past as essentially a local problem, Federal involvement in the investigation and prevention of arson has been minimal, if existent at all. Authorities now find, however, that the tentacles of arson have transcended jurisdictional boundaries and pose a disastrous threat to the future safety and financial stability of the country. As a result, the fire service, law enforcement, insurance industry, and various legislatures have mounted a combined offensive to deter its continuing devastation.

Traditionally, the law enforcement community has been on the periphery of arson. Since primary responsibility for such investigations has historically rested with the fire service, police have not generally assumed a major role in either the deterrence of arson or in the identification and apprehension of firesetters. But, arson has become one of the most prolific forms of criminality in this country.

Incendiarism (the willful destruction of property by fire) has destroyed or severely damaged practically every type of structure or mode of transportation in this country. It has also raped our forest and watershed lands and has been responsible for the death and injury of thousands of persons over the past years. An estimated 1,000 persons are killed and approximately 10,000 are injured by arson annually.<sup>3</sup>

The precise incidence and cost of incendiary crime, however, is unknown. According to a report submitted by the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Department of Justice, "... the magnitude of the arson problem is not widely appreciated, probably because of the lack of a well known source of reliable arson statistics."<sup>4</sup> However, the unavailability of reliable and informative statistics on arson not only is due to the lack of a centralized source of arson and fire statistics but "to the secrecy and detached nature of the offense and the oddities of intent and motivation."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the actual frequency of arson is distorted and unapparent.

#### **Incidence and Cost of Arson**

Though the exact statistical incidence of arson is unknown, its estimates clearly demonstrate a formidable threat. Its known and suspected occurrence appears to be growing at a quantum rate. For instance, during the 10-year period from 1964 to 1974, the reported incidence of incendiary and suspicious-origin fires of buildings more than tripled, increasing from approximately 31,000 to 114,000 in number—an approximate 270-percent increase.<sup>6</sup> Monetary losses during that period increased approximately 726 percent.<sup>7</sup> In 1974 alone the estimated loss figured at \$563 million.<sup>8</sup>

There were 187,400 incendiary and suspicious fires in 1974; the cumulative, estimated property loss for these fires totaled \$616 million. When one-half of the "unknown-cause" fires for that year were included, the incidence of arson climbed to over 502,000, with a total estimated property loss of almost \$1.3 billion.<sup>9</sup>

The "1978 National Fire Experience Survey," published by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), disclosed that the reported incidence of incendiary and suspicious-origin structure (508,512) and vehicle (48,444) fires totaled almost 557,000 for that 12-month period. Their aggregate property loss amounted to over \$1 billion. In the survey, however, the NFPA made no adjustments for unreported fires or losses.<sup>10</sup> If half of the unknown-cause fires were to be included in the 1978 estimates, the incidence of arson for that year could easily exceed \$1.5 billion and possibly approach \$2 billion in direct losses.

While presiding as Chairman of the U.S. Senate Arson-for-hire Hearings before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in 1978, Senator Sam Nunn (D-Georgia) charged that "arson is our costliest crime with losses estimated at \$2 billion a year

and rising at a rate of 25 percent annually." <sup>11</sup> When the indirect costs (increased taxes, higher insurance premiums, medical costs, and cost of fire service, etc.) associated with these fires are included, the annual loss due to arson may be as high as \$10 billion. <sup>12</sup>

#### Extent of Arson-For-Profit

According to Senator Nunn, arson-for-profit is "the fastest growing crime in this country." <sup>13</sup> But due to the nature of the offense, its actual incidence is as much speculation as fact.

The studies conducted, however, have found that the fraud motive was represented in only 5 percent of the sample of arrestees, even though they were involved in 17 percent of the cases. <sup>14</sup> Some authorities, however, have estimated arson-for-profit to represent at least 20 to 30 percent of the arsons, though "only three or four percent of those arrested for arson are suspected of doing it for profit." <sup>15</sup>

"There is currently a scarcity of reliable data on the relative incidence of arson-for-profit or on the types of structures or businesses which are at high risk. It is generally agreed, however, that the risk of fraud arson is especially high where changing economic conditions have created an over-insurance situation." <sup>16</sup>

Efforts are presently being taken by the fire service, the Nation's fire and casualty insurers, and law enforcement agencies to identify those high-risk structures and to take the profit out of arson. The deployment of Federal, State, and local arson task forces, organized crime strike forces, and fire-police arson investigative teams have been instrumental in surfacing and penetrating many arson-for-profit schemes and enterprises. Though prosecution of arson profiteers has excelled, the number of arsonists remaining at large is suspected to be plethoric.

Obviously, policymakers, as well as those directly responsible for fettering arson and arson-for-profit, need more comprehensive and accurate information if they are to attack effectively and curtail the growth of incendiarism in this country.



"... arson has become one of the most prolific forms of criminality in this country."

#### Problematic Areas in the Study of Arson

Historically, the scientific study of arson and firesetting behavior has been scattered and incomplete. Though arson has always represented a formidable threat to society, "very little interest has been generated in even understanding the arsonist as a type of offender, much less in tracing the etiology of arson." <sup>17</sup> Though much has been written on firesetting behavior, the literature provides little practical information for the investigator beyond a multiplicity of diverse and arbitrary classification systems, a variety of motivational factors, and a number of narrowly defined clinical profiles or composites of arsonists.

Most clinical and empirical studies in the past have focused principally on the pathological firesetter, such as the pyromaniac, the psychotic arsonist, the revenge firesetter, and the emotionally disturbed, repetitive child firesetter. Little concrete knowledge really exists regarding the "typical" arsonist or the incendiaries who set fires for financial gain.

Although some significant exploration has been made into the psychodynamics of the arsonist, few well-controlled and systematic studies have been conducted which produced reliable data. Research conclusions have often been contradictory and predicated on narrowly drawn and biased sample populations, incomplete data, and conjecture. As a result, the determinants of arson still remain largely unknown. Furthermore, the solutions to the prevention and control of psychologically motivated incendiarism are far from being resolved.

The arson researcher, however, is not solely responsible for this paucity of information or lack of systematic research. Efforts to explore the psychological aspects of firesetting have often been thwarted by variables beyond control, e.g., low apprehension and conviction rates of arsonists, the methods of legal disposition of arson cases, legal constraints in the disclosure of information, and the inherent difficulties associated with accessing samples of firesetters.

Five problematic areas have directly affected the systematic study of arson. These areas include apprehension of arsonists, legal disposition of arson cases, sources of arson statistics, legal constraints in information exchange, and focus, taxonomies, and conclusions of previous studies.

#### Apprehension of Arsonists

Arson is commonly committed under a veil of secrecy. Witnesses are scarce and evidence is often minimal, if existent at all. Consequently, relatively few arsonists are identified or eventually apprehended, and those caught may not be truly representative of the arsonist population. Some authorities have even declared that an

overwhelming majority of arsonists are never identified or arrested. <sup>18</sup>

Empirical studies in firesetting behavior intrinsically hinge on their accessibility to known arsonists. Research in this area is inherently biased and acutely dependent on the interests and talents of those responsible for sifting through the ashes of conflagrations, identifying and apprehending arsonists, and judiciously prosecuting them, since few arsonists are prone to turn themselves into the authorities or voluntarily confess.

Little may be truly known about the psychodynamics of the majority of firesetters or if the various psychological profiles extrapolated from the known arsonist population are typical and representative of those not identified. This problem is best illustrated by Dr. Bernard Levin of the Center for Fire Research. "Unfortunately, our knowledge about the psychopathology of firesetters is limited to those arsonists who are caught or give themselves up. In short, we know the most about the least successful arsonists." <sup>19</sup>

A 1977 report stated that arrest rates for arsonists were low in comparison to arrests of Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) Index offenders. In fact, for every 100 fires classified as incendiary or suspicious, only about 9 persons were arrested in comparison to 21 arrests for every 100 Index crimes. <sup>20</sup>

Not only is little known about arsonists, per se, but even less is known about the arsonist-for-profit. Again, there exist no exact statistics concerning the incidence of arson-for-profit nor for its apprehension rate.

#### Legal Disposition of Arson Cases

The systematic study of arson is further complicated by the legal disposition of arson cases. Not only are few arson offenders apprehended for their crimes, but even fewer are prosecuted or convicted.

The conviction rate for arson has been estimated between 1 and 2 percent nationally. <sup>21</sup> For each 100 reported incendiary or suspicious fires, there are approximately two individuals convicted. When the definition of arson is expanded to include one-half of the fires of "unknown causes," the conviction rate drops to 0.75. <sup>22</sup>

Reasons for the low conviction rate are multiple. In addition to the low apprehension rate of firesetters, many arson cases reportedly are not processed through the criminal justice system for one reason or another. For instance, prosecutors may elect not to prosecute due to insufficient evidence or may even refer certain defendants, who are found to be mentally ill or alcoholic, to the mental health community for treatment. Still other firesetters may be only partially processed through the system. Cases may be later dismissed or defendants acquitted of the charges brought against them.

The systematic study of arsonists has also been further complicated by the fact that some offenders are permitted to plea bargain to lesser offenses or to some crime unrelated to arson (burglary, breaking and entering, malicious mischief, criminal trespass, extortion, destruction of property, etc.). This, of course, statistically distorts the actual number of arsonists prosecuted and conceals their identities under other dispositions. Moreover, not all convicted arson offenders are incarcerated once they are convicted. In fact, it has been estimated that approximately one-half of the convicted adult arsonists and practically all of the juvenile arson offenders are not remanded to prison, jail, or juvenile correctional facilities. Probation appears to be a prevalent alternative to incarceration.

Since it is common practice for criminologists and clinicians in their study of criminal and abnormal behavior to select their sample populations from prisons, juvenile reformatories, psychiatric facilities, and parole and probationary groups, it is reasonable to anticipate that studies of arsonists would rely on similar environments and sample populations.

However, any attempt to develop a profile of the "typical" arsonist from these populations would be tenuous at best. Those arson offenders confined in prisons or psychiatric facilities or on probationary or parole status are not likely to represent a cross section of the arsonist population. In fact, they are most likely atypical, since such a small number are arrested or convicted for their crimes.

#### Sources of Arson Statistics

A third problematic area pertaining to the systematic study of arson relates to the compilation and analysis of national fire and arson statistics. They have been complicated principally by two factors—incomplete reporting and a lack of a centralized data collection and analysis system.

Traditionally, the law enforcement community has not assumed major responsibility for reporting, retrieving, or analyzing the incidence of fire or arson. This responsibility has been accepted chiefly by the fire service and insurance industry. As a result, only a small fraction of the actual occurrence of arson appears in national crime statistics.

In 1976, the National Leadership Seminars for Developing a Coordinated Attack on Arson specifically recommended that arson be declared a Part I crime in the FBI Uniform Crime Reports and that a better reporting, data collection, and data analysis program be developed and applied to arson.

Arson has been reported as a Part II offense in UCR since 1930. However, these figures reflect only arrest rates for arson and do not include estimated value of property damage. In October 1978, Federal legislation was passed mandating that arson be changed to a Part I offense in the UCR program, and legislation is currently pending before Congress which would mandate arson as a Part I offense on a permanent basis.

Henceforth, the volume of reported arsons, the number of persons arrested, clearances, types of property damaged, estimated value of property damage, and whether the structures were inhabited will be reported within the Part I offense classification. However, the total incendiary incidence will not be reflected in UCR, since suspicious and unknown-cause fires will not be represented.

The systematic study of the incidence and magnitude of arson has been severely hampered by the fragmentation and unsystematized approach employed in the collection and analysis of arson statistics. Improvements that have been made in this area should greatly enhance future research.

#### Legal Constraints in Information Exchange

The study of arson has been further complicated by certain legal constraints. For instance, there have existed certain legal prohibitions in the exchange of information between private industry and government. Laws governing privacy and confidentiality have played major roles in restricting the flow of information, especially between the private insurance industry and law enforcement. Insurers have been extremely guarded against possible liability and civil lawsuits stemming from violations of their clients' confidentiality and rights to privacy. There is currently a movement by the insurance industry to seek alternative solutions to this problem. One is the immunization of the insurance industry should it furnish relevant information to law enforcement relating to suspected arson. Only through this type of cooperative effort will law enforcement be in a position to respond appropriately and vigorously to the arson crisis at hand.

Furthermore, the researcher has also been restricted in his efforts to collect vital information on convicted arsonists. The exploratory efforts of behavioral scientists are contingent on the legal constraints authorizing them access to relevant information and to



**"Firesetting is often a symptom of a highly complex behavioral problem."**

the personages they need to assess. The narrower the sample population they are permitted to investigate, the more significant the bias of their studies.

#### Focus, Conclusions, and Taxonomies of Previous Studies

A fifth problematic area in the systematic study of firesetting and arson behavior relates to the focus and conclusions of past research. Most of the literature on firesetting has been psychologically or psychoanalytically oriented. However, "intensive psychopathological studies of individual cases are rare. . . ." <sup>23</sup> Many of the published studies have been primarily comprehensive, descriptive, and statistical reviews of the psychopathology of convicted or hospitalized firesetters.

Consequently, with regard to the arsonist in general, "little concrete knowledge exists regarding his identity and motivation. A general review of the literature reveals different authors presenting different symptomatic characteristics and markedly different etiological hypotheses for the arsonist. In general, there is considerable overlap of concepts and terminology within these hypotheses, and sharp contradictions are evident in clinical diagnosis." <sup>24</sup>

The theories advanced concerning the behavior of arsonists, their purported motives, personality characteristics, etiological factors, and taxonomies or classification systems are many and varied. As a result, the researcher or investigator attempting to gain a clear understanding of firesetting behavior is often overwhelmed and frustrated by the seemingly myriad assembly of conflicting data.

Research projects have often centered on very selective populations, e.g., children, adolescents, adults, females, convicted offenders, and hospitalized patients, or have been divided into age groups, sex, and psychiatric disorders. As a result data gleaned from these studies have tended to confuse and contradict the finding of others. Levin also acknowledges that much of the literature tends "to deal with only one or two motives and/or a narrow age range." <sup>25</sup>

Firesetters have also been labeled, classified, and grouped at the researcher's discretion. Unfortunately, the multiplicity of systems which have evolved frequently confuse the investigator.

"Classification systems both reflect and shape the distinctions which researchers make within their field of study. . . . Consequently, categories of firesetters are often arbitrarily defined, and there is often a great deal of inconsistency in classification. Firesetters have probably most often been typed in terms of their motives for the fire-setting act. . . ." <sup>26</sup>

A survey of the literature on incendiarism reflects only scanty reference to arson-for-profit. One of the most quoted studies was published by James A. Inciardi in 1970. However, his sample population of 138 convicted and paroled arsonists contained only 10 "insurance-claim firesetters." <sup>27</sup> Other noted researchers have studied the arson profiteer, but did not conduct in-depth analyses. Consequently, much of what is purportedly known about the characteristics of arsonists who set fires for fraud appears to be based on an insignificant number of known offenders.

*The Psychology of Firesetting: A Review and Appraisal*, issued in 1979 by the Center for Fire Research, National Bureau of Standards, presents an excellent overview of the psychological and psychoanalytic literature on firesetting, but also fails to explore arson-for-profit in any appreciable degree. The authors of the study, however, explain why arson-for-profit is generally excluded from the psychological and psychiatric discussion of firesetting. "There is little in the psychological or psychiatric literature about arson-for-profit, presumably because it is considered a rational act, and thus not of great interest from a psychological standpoint." <sup>28</sup>

#### Establishment of Cause and Intent

Since fire is a natural phenomenon and often accidental or the product of unintentional behavior, a lengthy and exhaustive investigation is frequently required before determining its exact cause. Often, such investigations are further complicated by the devastation of the fire itself or the inadvertent destruction of evidence by responding firefighters in their attempt to control and extinguish the fire.

Unless it can be proven that a fire was willfully and maliciously set, the crime of arson does not legally exist. Proof of arson, therefore, rests on the expertise of the investigator and his ability to ascertain the presence of malicious intent or premeditation.

The motif of the fire often provides clues as to the presence or absence of criminal intent. Factors often used to establish arson include the type of fire, its point of origin, the presence or absence of accelerants, the type of structure, the time of day the fire occurs, ownership of the property, market value, existence of over-insurance, fire history of the structure, occupancy, and evidence of recent sale or title change.

Even after a thorough investigation, the arson investigator may not be able to establish arson positively. As a result, a significant portion of the fires experienced each year are labeled "unknown-cause" or "suspicious." Consequently, "the number of fires classified as incendiary significantly understates the actual amount of arson." <sup>29</sup>

Robert May, Executive Secretary of the International Association of Arson Investigators, was recently quoted as saying, "To detect and apprehend arsonists takes even more technical expertise than homicide." <sup>30</sup> This may very well be true in many cases, since an exhaustive investigation is often necessary to establish the fact that a crime has been committed. It is even more difficult to find an identifiable motive or to construct a personality from the ashes of a fire.

#### Motive v. Intent

Motive is some inner drive or impulse that causes a person to do something or act in a certain way. Basically, it is the cause, reason, or incentive that induces or prompts specific behavior. In a legal context, motive explains "why" the offender committed his unlawful act, e.g. murder, rape, or arson.

Though motive, unlike intent (willfulness), is not an essential element in criminal prosecution, it often lends support to it. Motive, for instance, frequently plays a crucial role in determining the cause of a fire, as well as the identity of the person or persons responsible for setting it.

#### Establishment of Motive

Establishing a motive generally assists the investigator in directing his investigation and focusing attention on likely suspects. However, searching the ruins of a conflagration for an identifiable motive may prove to be futile. Firesetting is often a symptom of a highly complex behavioral problem. Consequently, the actual motive for firesetting may not be readily apparent. In fact, it may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain motives such as revenge, intimidation, or profit, especially if they are concealed or complicated by the lack of sufficient evidence or by the presence of distorted and conflicting clues. The arsonist may even purposefully disguise his firesetting to mislead the investigator as to his true motive. Sometimes, an identifiable motive may be lacking entirely. Thus, misinterpretation or premature and faulty interpretation of motive may prove to be fatal in resolving a case. Consequently, arbitrarily selecting one motive to the exclusion of all others may prove to be detrimental to that particular investigation.

#### Conscious v. Unconscious Motivation

Psychodynamically, it is conceivable that the firesetter may be fully aware of why he is setting a fire, only somewhat cognizant of the reason, or even totally unaware of his true motivation. In fact, when questioned about his behavior, the arsonist may be unable to account for his crime. Psychiatrist W. A. White concluded over 3 decades ago that the failure to consider unconscious motivation was "probably the cause of more inadequacies in the understanding of human behavior than any other one thing." <sup>31</sup>

Although a tenant torches his apartment complex to get back at the owner for raising the rent, the motive may be more than revenge. It may actually represent an unconscious desire to express hostility and destructiveness. Even the hired arsonist may be motivated by more than money. He may use firesetting as an instrument of revenge against society or as a way of expressing his sadistic tendencies. "When a person sets a fire, whatever the particular motive, he is trying to achieve something which is necessary or desirable to him at that moment."<sup>32</sup> The problem is that he may lack conscious awareness of why he is doing it.

#### Motivational v. Motiveless Firesetting

Motivational firesetting, also known as psychologically motivated arson, has traditionally been differentiated from motiveless firesetting (pyromania). According to Vreeland and Waller in *The Psychology of Firesetting: A Review and Appraisal*, motivational firesetters "generally are aware of some specific motive, or reason, for setting the fire. . . ."<sup>33</sup> They willfully and maliciously set fires for such reasons as revenge, spite, and financial gain.

Pyromaniacs, on the other hand, are said to lack conscious motivation for their firesetting; however, they are aware of their act. Fitch and Porter noted that "the lack of motive is a trademark of the pyromaniac."<sup>34</sup> Lewis and Yarnell in their study of pathological firesetters define pyromaniacs as "offenders who said they set their fires for no practical reason and received no material profit from the act, their only motive being to obtain some sort of sensual satisfaction."<sup>35</sup>

The pyromaniac is also said to be compulsively driven by an "irresistible impulse" to set fires. Although the true extent of pyromania is unknown, authorities today do not believe that it represents the predominant type of firesetting being currently experienced in this country.

#### Classification of Motivational Firesetting

There are probably as many motives for firesetting as there are firesetters. Vreeland and Waller have noted that the range of motives for the motivated firesetter is a striking feature of that category.<sup>36</sup> In an attempt to study systematically the arsonist, the researcher has most often classified him according to his motive. These classifications have often enhanced the investigator in telescoping his investigation.

The USFA, in an attempt to facilitate the understanding and identification of motivational patterns, has developed 24 various classifications with their own respective characteristics and motivational aspects.

These types of arsons have been systematized into five major headings:

- 1) Organized crime (loan sharking, extortion, strippers, and other crime concealment);
- 2) Insurance/housing fraud (over-insurance, antipreservation, block-busting, parcel clearance, gentrification, stop loss, and tax shelters);
- 3) Commercial (inventory depletion, modernization, and stop loss);
- 4) Residential (relocation, redecorating, public housing, and automobile); and
- 5) Psychological (children and juveniles, pyromania, political, and wildlands).<sup>37</sup>

In the report, *Arson and Arson Investigation: Survey and Assessment*, the authors aggregated 16 different motives into 6 groups: (1) Revenge, spite, and jealousy; (2) vandalism and malicious mischief; (3) crime concealment and diversionary tactics; (4) profit and insurance fraud; (5) intimidation, extortion, and sabotage; and (6) psychiatric afflictions, pyromania, alcoholism, and feeble-mindedness.<sup>38</sup> These groups were designed to facilitate the construction and exploration of arsonist typologies.

Wolford has noted, however, that in actuality very little concrete knowledge exists regarding the motivation of arsonists.<sup>39</sup> The literature on firesetting, nevertheless, is replete with motivational classification systems. However, the isolation of a particular firesetting motive may require weeks, even months, of investigative work, if it can be accomplished at all.

#### Pathological v. Nonpathological Motivation

The psychological and psychiatric literature on firesetting also distinguishes between pathological and non-pathological incendiaries. Pathological firesetting is believed to be irrationally motivated, whereas the converse is believed for nonpathological firesetting. Since it is commonly held that anyone who maliciously sets a fire is engaging in an abnormal act, it would appear on the surface that all arsonists are pathological. In fact, Gold has stated that "all firesetting is pathological."<sup>40</sup> However, behavioral scientists and clinicians who study firesetting behavior believe that some incendiaryism is the result of rational decisionmaking. Arson-for-profit (fraud), for instance, has been perceived as a rational act. In other words, it is believed that the "torch" consciously, rationally, and premeditatively designs and perpetrates his crime. Rationally motivated firesetting also includes the use of arson for extortion, homicide, intimidation, revenge, social and political protest, rioting, sabotage, crime concealment, and even diversionary tactics.<sup>41</sup>

The irrational and pathological firesetter, however, typically manifests some degree of mental, emotional or personality disturbance, maladjustment, or defect. He frequently sets fires as an act of aggression, hostility, or revenge; to gain attention and recognition; to embellish his deflated sense of worth; to experience excitement; to obtain sensual or sexual satisfaction; or as a result of delusions and/or hallucinations. Generally included within this category are compulsive firesetters (pyromaniacs), excitement and attention-seeking arsonists, suicidal firesetters, psychotic

firesetters, disturbed children and juveniles, revenge firesetters, and firesetters suffering from alcoholism.<sup>42</sup>

Lewis and Yarnell have reportedly conducted the most comprehensive study on pathological firesetters to date. Their work, entitled *Pathological Firesetting (pyromania)*, was published in 1951 and still serves as the authoritative source on the subject.

The following is their "Classification of Fire Setting Because of Mental Reasons":

- 1) Accidental or unintentional group—firesetters who set fires during a temporary, confused or delirious state or with a lack of judgment because of feeble-mindedness (mental retardation).
- 2) Delusional group—psychotic firesetters who "set fires because so instructed by the hallucinated voicing God or other authority or . . . while under the delusory influence of ideas of purification. . . ."
- 3) Erotic group—pyromaniacs and a large variety of firesetters having sexual perversions.
- 4) Revenge group.
- 5) Children's group—children who set fires "for excitement and mischief with the intention of extinguishing them before they get out of hand."<sup>43</sup>

They also noted that fires are deliberately set by psychotics, psychopaths, and "mental defectives" (below normal intelligence) for one or more of the following motives:

- a. As a reaction against a social order which they believe is operating against their interests
- b. To wreak vengeance against an employer
- c. As a revenge for injured vanity
- d. As a jealous rage reaction
- e. As an opportunity to perform heroic endeavors as a fire fighter
- f. As a perverted sexual pleasure in the nature of a conversion of a sexual impulse into a special substitutive excitement."<sup>44</sup>

Pyromania represented the largest group (60 percent) within their study.<sup>45</sup>

#### Multimotives in Firesetting

It should be noted that "several motives may underlie an act of ar-

son."<sup>46</sup> A review of the psychological and psychiatric literature on firesetting reflects that such behavior is often multidetermined. This factor may partly explain why so few arsonists are ever identified and why the solution rate in known arson cases is so low.

#### Revenge: The Underlying Motive

As previously noted, fire has been associated with love, aggression, hostility, destruction, sadism, revenge, and a host of other psychological factors. Though the exact psychic determinants of firesetting remain unanswered, a common denominator appears to be punitiveness or revenge. In fact, revenge seems to run like a thread throughout motivational arson. Lewis and Yarnell have also reported that "the element of revenge is never entirely absent,"<sup>47</sup> even in pyromania. Thus, it appears that firesetting conveniently serves as an instrument for venting aggressive and revengeful tendencies in many, if not all, firesettings.

The motives associated with fire setting are multiple, overlapping, and often disguised under a facade of distorted and pathological behavior. The investigator in striving to pinpoint responsibility for such destructiveness must, as a matter of investigative procedure, attempt to identify the true motivation underlying the act. Once the primary motive is isolated, the investigator is often better equipped to focus his investigation on likely suspects. However, motive alone does not necessarily or sufficiently differentiate one firesetter from another, since they often share common motives for setting fires. Some firesetters, however, are uniquely motivated and therefore are better candidates for profiling. Oftentimes their fires more readily reflect evidence of behavioral and psychological maladjustment.

The development of psychological profiles on such firesetters would then possibly enhance the investigator's ability to identify and apprehend them more swiftly. Profiling the firesetter will be discussed in the next issue of the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. **FBI**

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Nolan D.C. Lewis, "Pathological Firesetting and Sexual Motivation," *Sexual Behavior and the Law* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1965), p. 630.
- <sup>2</sup> John W. Macy, Jr., "To the Reader," *Report to the Congress: Arson—the Federal Role in Arson Prevention and Control* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Fire Administration, Federal Emergency Management Agency, August 1979), p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> John F. Boudreau, et al., *Arson and Arson Investigation: Survey and Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 1.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>5</sup> Val Beyer Satterfield, "Criteria for Detection and Control of Arsonists," *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science*, vol. 44, No. 4, November-December 1953, p. 421.
- <sup>6</sup> Boudreau, supra, p. 5; Paul E. Teague, "Action Against Arson," *Fire Journal*, vol. 72, No. 2, March 1976, p. 46.
- <sup>7</sup> Teague, *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Boudreau, supra.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael J. Karter, Jr., "The 1978 United States Fire Experience," *Fire Journal*, vol. 73, No. 5, September 1979, p. 87.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, *Arson-for-Profit, Hearings before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations*, 95th Cong., 2d sess., (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 1.
- <sup>12</sup> "New Tactics in the Battle Against Fires for Profit," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 5, 1977, p. 31.
- <sup>13</sup> U.S., Congress, Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, supra.
- <sup>14</sup> Boudreau, supra, p. 92.
- <sup>15</sup> Kevin Krajick, "The ABC's of Arson," *Police Magazine*, July 1979, p. 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Robert C. Vreeland and Marcus B. Waller, *The Psychology of Firesetting: A Review and Appraisal* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1979), p. 4.
- <sup>17</sup> Michael R. Wolford, "Some Attitudinal, Psychological and Sociological Characteristics of Incarcerated Arsonists," presented at the 17th Annual Arson Detection and Investigation Seminar, Sarasota, Fla., August 4, 1971, p. 1.
- <sup>18</sup> Boudreau, supra, p. 92.
- <sup>19</sup> Bernard Levin, "Psychological Characteristics of Firesetters," *Fire Journal*, vol. 70, No. 2, March 1976, p. 36.
- <sup>20</sup> Boudreau, supra, p. 92.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*; U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Governmental Affairs, supra.
- <sup>22</sup> Boudreau, *ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>23</sup> John M. Macdonald, "Many Motivations Are Behind Acts of the Arsonist," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, vol. 29, No. 7, July 1960, p. 3.
- <sup>24</sup> Wolford, supra.
- <sup>25</sup> Levin, supra, p. 36.
- <sup>26</sup> Vreeland and Waller, supra, p. 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Vreeland and Waller, "The Adult Firesetter: A Typology," *Criminology*, vol. 8, August 1970, pp. 145-155.
- <sup>28</sup> Vreeland and Waller, supra, p. 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Boudreau, supra, p. 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Robery May, quoted in "The Arson Epidemic: Who Should Investigate?" *Police Magazine*, July 1979, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> W. A. White, "Medical Philosophy from the Viewpoint of a Psychiatrist," *Psychiatry*, vol. 10, 1947, pp. 77-98.
- <sup>32</sup> Louis H. Gold, "Psychiatric Profile of the Firesetter," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, vol. 7, No. 4, October 1962, p. 416.
- <sup>33</sup> Vreeland and Waller, supra, p. 6.
- <sup>34</sup> Richard D. Fitch and Edward A. Porter, *Accidental and Incendiary* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), p. 87.
- <sup>35</sup> Nolan D. C. Lewis and Helen Yarnell, *Pathological Firesetting* (pyromania), Nervous and Mental Disease Monographs, No. 82 (New York: Coolidge Foundation, 1951).
- <sup>36</sup> Vreeland and Waller, supra, p. 6.
- <sup>37</sup> Macy, supra, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>38</sup> Boudreau, supra, pp. 19-21.
- <sup>39</sup> Wolford, supra, p. 1.
- <sup>40</sup> Gold, supra, p. 409.
- <sup>41</sup> Vreeland and Waller, supra, p. 9; John M. Macdonald, *Bombers and Firesetters* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1977), pp. 200-203; Charles E. O'Hara, *Fundamentals of Criminal Investigation*, 4th ed. (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1976), p. 243; Fitch and Porter, supra, pp. 83 and 91; Kendall D. Moll, *Arson, Vandalism and Violence: Law Enforcement Problems Affecting Fire Departments* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, 1974), p. 11; R. W. Conant, "Rioting Insurrection and Civil Disobedience," in *Violence: Causes and Solutions* (New York: Dell, 1970), pp. 105-115.
- <sup>42</sup> Lewis and Yarnell, supra; Gold, supra; John G. Gunderson, "Management of Manic States: The Problem of Fire Setting," *Psychiatry*, vol. 37, May 1974, pp. 137-146; Lee B. Macht and John E. Mack, "The Firesetter Syndrome," *Psychiatry*, vol. 31, 1968, pp. 277-288.
- <sup>43</sup> Lewis and Yarnell, supra, pp. vii-viii.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>46</sup> Macdonald, supra, p. 198.
- <sup>47</sup> Lewis and Yarnell, supra, p. 118.

**END**