

3-27-82

THE JUVENILE FIRE SETTER

FIRE/ARSON INVESTIGATION
RESEARCH PAPER
JULY 13-31, 1981

THE JUVENILE FIRE SETTER

Submitted by: Salvatore A. Arnone
Detective Supervisor
Rochester, NY, Police Dept.

Ralph DiaPaul
Detective, Arson Squad
Niagara Falls, NY, Police Dept.

George H. Gruler
Director, Law Enforcement
Southwestern Region
U.S. Forest Service
Albuquerque, NM

Robert A. Brisentine
Firefighter
Fort Wayne, IN

John M. Hersh
Fire Marshal
Hagerstown, MD

Charles Evancho
Lieutenant
Detroit Fire Dept.
Arson Squad

Dale I. Cogley
Pennsylvania State Police
Coudersport, PA

U.S. Department of Justice 80544
National Institute of Justice

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this copyrighted material has been granted by

Public Domain
Nat'l Emerg. Training Ctr.

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the copyright owner.

Juvenile fires account for large monetary losses each year and untold damages to public facilities, such as schools, churches, etc. The juvenile who is a repeated fire setter, may be suffering from severe behavioral symptoms, and/or an obvious psychological disturbance. Although fires set by juveniles lack any pronounced skill in most cases, their fires and resulting damages are effective.

Juvenile fires lack planning and indicate signs of inexperience. For example, often several attempts are made before the action or results are achieved. An excess of incendiary items may be found at the scene, such as matches, papers, etc. The child with behavioral problems may show signs of this in various ways, which when observed by a trained professional, are indicators and an insight to a child fire setter. These characteristics are varied and many.

The child's association with a family member, which in a child's mind is lacking warmth, or what the child perceives to be love withheld from him, may manifest itself in the child. The result could be a set fire, to alleviate or work out a formed aggression against a family member. This is also substantiated by the fact that many child set fires are started in the surrounding area of his home.

In the adolescent stage of childhood, children have many fantasies relating to evil objects, which causes them to be frightened, thereby, creating a risk-fear situation. This results in retaliation against evil by means of fire; in effect, burning it away.

The physically handicapped child has often sought to establish his confidence by means of fire. In this way, he regains stature as being capable and able to exert strength and power over objects, which, because of his handicap, are believed to be beyond his physical capabilities.

NCJ# 80544

Conversely, the healthy child who exhibits excessive aggression, often meets his aggression in the form of strength and superiority over objects and persons, by means of fire. In one such form, he compensates for his lack of size, and in effect, for the authority exerted over him by adults who by virtue of nature are much bigger and stronger than he.

The child who is reared in an environment where there is an absence of one parent and the remaining parent is ineffective in control or love, is indicative of a fire setter characteristic.

Total Arson arrests related to gender of the child fire setter were established for the year 1969-1978¹ and listed as follows:

<u>SEX</u>	<u>TOTAL ARREST</u>	<u>PERCENT DISTRIBUTION</u>
Male	112,052	89.3
Female	13,461	10.7
Total	125,513	100.0
Total Arson Arrest - By Race under age 18 - 1969-1978:		
White	51,929	80.0
Black	12,072	18.6
Others	921	1.4
Total	64,922	100.0

Motives of Juvenile Fire Setters

Like all classifications of the motives for arson, revenge is just as controversial among the experts. Lewis and Yarnell, in their 1951 publication, indicates that revenge is nearly always basic and does not change with the age of the perpetrator.

The adolescent who is clearly motivated by revenge, realizes the vengeance, by seeing the destruction wrought by his act. This would indicate

that should a similar situation arise, there would be a repetitive reaction in order to again obtain revenge. This is especially true, if there is no retribution for the act the first time. The incident triggering the revenge may either be trivial or serious. What matters, is how trivial or serious the fire setter considers it. Belief that a fire set for revenge is not likely to be repeated, is not the general consensus of many experts.

Further complicating the situation, is the fact that the adolescent fire setter may be totally unaware of the true motivation for his act. Even the paid torch can be unconsciously motivated and expressing sadistic tendencies against society. When a person sets a fire, whatever the particular motive, he is trying to achieve something which is necessary or desirable to him at the moment.² He probably is not consciously aware of the motive.

There are probably as many motives for setting fires as there are fire setters. The adolescent fire setter is no exception to that statement. Some behavioral scientists believe that fire setting is the result of rational decision making. They believe that the "torch" consciously and premeditatedly designs and commits his crime. Still others believe that the converse is true and that the act of fire setting is an abnormal act. In fact, Gold has stated that "All fire setting is pathological."³

Many psychological factors, such as love, aggression, hostility, destruction, sadism, revenge and many others, have been associated with fire setters. Though no one can seem to determine the exact psychological reasons for fire setting, a common and prevalent factor is retaliation or revenge, especially in the adolescent fire setter. In fact, in recent years, vengeance has increased in arson, but it was evident in 1951, when Lewis and Yarnell reported that "the elements of revenge is never entirely absent."⁴

In summary, it should be noted that in the adolescent, it appears that the fire setting serves as an instrument for venting revengeful and aggressive tendencies. Poor detection and enforcement will have a great effect on the system, because the adolescent group is constantly testing the system.

Jealousy

The motivation of jealousy for fire setting is somewhat on par with revenge. Another characteristic of a firesetter is the appeasement of vanity, at a time when there is no feeling for parents, relatives or any other person he may know. The object of the adolescent is to attack girls for jealousy, or just to use a crutch in some manner or for his ego. The fire setter operates by himself and usually involves his teacher, relative or someone he is involved with. He may come from a poor social background, usually his family standards are low. This type of fire setter does not attempt to put out the fires. He sits back and persecutes mankind as a wicked person.

Humiliation and/or Ego

Children, as adults, attempt to gain recognition for accomplishment. In some cases useful, and in others, adversely, wanting recognition with resulting prestige in family groups, community groups and often peer groups. Serving one's ego, is an important factor. The factor justifies the fire setter's acts in the thinking pattern of this group of persons.

Experience has shown that admission from juveniles have ended their desires and habits of fire setting. Failure to obtain admission, has served to fuel the ego, leading to more fire setting.

Suicide Motivation

The suicide motivation appears when an individual wants to destroy himself to show that they have made amends for their actions, or which they are ashamed.

Lewis and Yarnell⁵ discussed suicide as a motive. The actual cases discussed, were not true suicides, because the victims lived after their attempt. Lewis and Yarnell based their decision on the suicidal notes left behind and statements of the subject. They base a belief of this motivating factor on statements made by the subjects involved and notes indicating they were suicidal motivated.

J. Davis⁶ supports Lewis and Yarnell by printing the cases of five successful juvenile suicides. All of the victims had a history of psychiatric problems. He pointed out that while documented suicides by fire in the United States is rare, in other countries, it is relatively common.

Belief by some, is that suicide by fire is more common than thought, but not often considered by the investigator.

Pyromania

The person who has no rational motive to set a fire is called a pyromaniac. Pyromania may be described as an over-powering desire to set things on fire. It is only arsonists with no apparent motives, who are usually termed "pyros."

All normal individuals know that fire setting is wrong and that to burn another's property may result in extensive damage and possible loss of life. Almost all "pyros" know that arson is wrong, but they minimize this knowledge to the more pressing desire to have a fire.

Juvenile fire setters cannot be considered "pyros", until a behavior pattern can be established. Most fire setting by youngsters is experimental on their part and not malicious. The young fire setter has an abnormal craving for power and prestige and many times identifies with the fire-fighters attempts themselves. They are not interested in the fire itself, but with the power that will extinguish it. Many juvenile fires lack any real motive, but are caused by accident, carelessness, pranks or playing with incendiary materials.

Pyromania may be apparent in a person at a very early age, however, sometimes a young person with such tendencies just wants to start some excitement, or to be the center of attention. Many of these juveniles can be cured with the proper training.

Overcoming Physical Limitations

Juveniles who suffer from serious physical and mental handicaps are individuals who are often suspected of setting fires in general resentment to their slight in life. Those who suffer from such abnormalities cannot participate in sporting activities and like endeavors, as do normal children their age. They also feel their handicaps will prevent them from achieving their mark or rightful place in society, as their brothers and sisters do.

Also, youths who feel that they are held down by society, or restrained from movement, also set fires in dwellings and other structures, as a means of resentment and escape. By setting these fires, they honestly believe that these acts will propel them into the limelight, so to speak, thus creating an impact on society and instant stardom.

Kicks

The adolescent fire setter often offers the excuse "I just wanted to see the fire burn and cause some excitement." Juveniles using these motives are group or "gang" workers, with as many as five or six traveling together. These kids do not consider the significance of their fires as to the loss of property, or even life. They will try anything to change these sedate or "dull" ways of living. Alcohol is almost always a contributing factor in this motive of firesetting.

It has been noted that fire setting has been relegated to the male juvenile. Other than in institutions of correction, fire setting does not play a part in the life of the female adolescent.

Summary

By attempting to totally understand the motives of the juvenile fire setter, the arson investigator can do his part in suppressing the amount of incidents in adolescent related fires. The reasons and motives juveniles

use to become involved in these antisocial acts are many, but learning about each of them can better help the investigator to guide these children into the proper hands of agencies who can rectify the problem before they become too deeply involved.

We, in analogy, must not only be able to seek out and remove the abcess, but must determine and eliminate the reason the abcess occurred in the first place.

Although problems of delinquency appear constantly very little is published on juvenile arson. The emphasis should be placed on prevention and channeling youthful energies toward constructive outlets and the correction of criminal tendencies.⁷

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bossart, C. D. - "Motives of the Adolescent Fire Setter," Fire Engineering, July 1963, Vol. 116

Rider, Anthony Olen - "The Firesetter a Psychological Profile," Crime Problems, July 1980

Federal Bureau of Investigation - "Crime in the United States," U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., July 1980

Davis, J. - "Suicide by Fire," Journal of Forensic Science, 1962

Lewis, N. D. C. and Yarnell, H. - "Pathological Firesetter"

Huron, Benjamin S. - "Elements of Arson Investigation," The Reuben H. Donnelley Corp.

Selected articles - International Association Arson Investigation (1974), Section eighteen/Article seven, Page one

FOOTNOTES

1. Source: U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation - "Crime in the United States" (Annual), Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969-1978 - July issue F.B.I. Bulletin - July 1980
2. Louis H. Gold - "Psychiatric Profile of the Firesetter", Journal of Forensic Sciences, Vol. 1 - No. 4, 1962
3. Nolan D. C. Lewis and Helen Yarnell - "Pathological Firesetter", "(Pyromania) Nervous and Mental Disease" Monographs No. 82 (New York Coolidge Foundation, 1951)
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. J. Davis - "Suicide by Fire", Journal of Forensic Sciences, 1962
7. Benjamin S. Huron - "Elements of Arson Investigation"

END