ARSON

Your Resource for Information and Assistance

Protecting the rights of crime victims

Spokane Crime Victim Service Center
1.866.751.7119

1.888.603.3100
Crime Compensation Program
National Arson
Prevention Clearinghouse

1.800.762.3716
Crime Victim
Compensation Program

1.888.762.3716
Crime Victim
Compensation Program

1.800.762.3716
Office for Victims of
National Arson
Prevention Clearinghouse

In 2007, 14,197 law enforcement agencies (providing 1-12 months of arson data) reported 64,332 arsons. Of those agencies, 14,131 provided expanded offense data about 57,224 arsons.

Arsons involving structures (residential, storage, public, etc.) accounted for 42.9 percent of the total number of arson offenses. Mobile property involved 27.9 percent of arsons, and other types of property (such as crops, timber, fences, etc.) accounted for 29.2 percent of reported arsons.

The average dollar loss due to arson was $17,289.

Arsons of industrial/manufacturing structures resulted in the highest average dollar losses (an average of $114,699 per arson).

In 2007, arson offenses decreased by 6.7 percent when compared with arson data reported in 2006.

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Other facts about arson:

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Vandalism-motivated arson is typically committed by male juveniles who have completed seven to nine years of school. The crime tends to occur spontaneously and is often done by groups. Frequently, entry is gained through force, such as through a window, and the fire is started with materials present at the scene.

Excitement-motivated arsonist starts fires to satisfy a craving for excitement. These fires rarely harm people. In some cases of deserted structures, volunteer firefighters and “firebuffs” may be culprits. Slightly older than the vandal, this arsonist tends to have completed ten or more years of school, but generally still lives with one or more parent. He tends to be socially inadequate and has a police record of nuisances.

Revenge-motivated arson is done in retaliation for some wrong doing against the arsonist, real or imagined, by society, a person or group of persons, or some establishment. It may be a well-planned, single occurrence or a serial arsonist taking revenge on society with little or no planning. The victim of this type of arson usually has a history of conflicts with the perpetrator, and the arson tends to be interracial. Females tend to target personal possessions, as do romantically slighted revenge-takers. Females tend to use readily accessible flammables, while men prefer Molotov cocktails and/or excessive amounts of accelerant.

Crime concealment-motivated arson, the fire may be used to destroy bodies, forensic evidence, records, or to distract from the real crime (such as a burglary). The perpetrator commonly uses alcohol or drugs and usually has a history of police or fire department contacts or arrests. In the cases of murder-concealment, a liquid accelerant is often used, and the crime tends to be disorganized.

Although many arson crimes are profit-motivated, research shows that the number of child fire starters is on the rise. Almost half (48 percent) of those arrested for the crime of arson in 1999 were under the age of 18 (FBI, 2000).

Firesetting by both adults and children can be the result of pathological behaviors, including some classified as pyromania—the inability to resist impulses to set fires. Much progress has been made in detecting and treating such pathological behaviors related to firesetting (Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987).

WHAT IS ARSON?

Arson is defined as “any willful or malicious burning or attempt to burn, with or without intent to defraud, a dwelling, house, public building, motor vehicle or aircraft, personal property of another, etc.” (FBI, 2000, p. 54). Only fires determined through investigation to have been willfully or maliciously set are classified as arsons (National Center for Victims of Crime). The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) is the lead federal agency responsible for investigating major arson and explosive crimes.

Hundreds of lives are lost each year in arson-related fires, and thousands suffer burns and other injuries as a result of these crimes. In addition, arson is very financially costly to our society.