

## WHAT ARE THE FACTS ABOUT ARSON?

- 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.
- Nationwide, the rate of arson was 24.7 offenses for every 100,000 inhabitants.

\* U.S. Department of Justice/Federal Bureau of Investigation, Criminal Justice Information Services Division, *Crime in the United States 2007*.

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Your Resource for Information and Assistance

## ARSON



## 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.

The main motivations for committing arson tend to fall under the categories of vandalism, excitement, revenge, crime concealment, profit and extremist (*Crime Classification Manual: A Standard System for Investigating and Classifying Violent Crimes*. New York: Lexington Books (1995).

Whether it is done for profit or protest, arson is so easy to commit, and the offenders are so hard to apprehend or convict, that little progress is being made to control the problem. “Arson is taking a backseat for many crime prevention practitioners because drug-related and violent crimes are receiving the priority,” says Rick Gilman, Executive Director of the Insurance Committee for Arson Control, which is based in New York City (Office of Criminal Justice Programs, 1990). Gilman also notes that arson accounts for 14 percent of all structural fires and 25 percent of all fire-related dollar losses in our county. This equates to millions of dollars in losses each year.

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).

**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.

The purpose of **profit-motivated arson** is to achieve monetary gain. This category includes fraud, employment and competition. One of the most commonly heard of is insurance fraud. These fires tend to be more sophisticated with less physical evidence and more complex fire-starting devices. Frequently, the offender is hired, leaves the crime scene and does not return.

**Extremist-motivated arson** is done to further a cause. Categories such as terrorism, riots and discrimination fall under this distinction. The target usually represents the antithesis of the offender’s belief. It is usually organized, planned and done in groups. Explosive devices such as Molotov cocktails are commonly used. The offender is readily identified with the cause or group behind this crime.