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The psychiatric study of firesetting reveals that such behavior "represents the means of dealing with or giving expression to deeper emotional conflicts." 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 psycho-dynamics 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 firesitters.

Arson: A National Epidemic

Arson, the willful and malicious burning of property, is "one of the nation's most serious human-made disasters," 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 county. 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 firesitters. 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 forests 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.

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." 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." 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 mates clearly demonstrate a formidable threat. It's 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 51,000 to 114,000 in number—an approximately 270-percent increase. Monetary losses during that period increased approximately 728 percent. In 1974 alone the estimated loss figure was $953 million.

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.

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. 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. 11-14 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 is estimated to be $1 billion. 

Extent of Arson-For-Profit

According to Senator Nunn, arson-for-profit is "the fastest growing crime in this country." 15 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 arsons studied, even though they were involved in 17 percent of the cases. 16 Some authorities, however, have estimated that arsons for profit may be as high as 50 percent. Further, the number of fires set by arsonists varies greatly depending on the interests and talents of those responsible for setting the fires of "unknown causes." This conviction rate drops to 0.75. 17 Reasons for the low conviction rate are multiplicity. In addition to the low apprehension rate of fire investigators, 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 to the mental health community for treatment. Still other fire investigators 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 are some crimes related to arson (burglary, breaking and entering, extortion, destruction of property, etc.) 

The systematic study of arsonists in the past has focused primarily on the pathological fire-setter, such as the pyromaniac, the psychotic arsonist, the revenge fire-setter, and the emotionally disturbed, repetitive child fire-setter. Little concrete knowledge 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 the occurrence and control of psychologically motivated incendiaries remain to be resolved.

The arson researcher, however, is not solely responsible for this paucity of information or lack of systematic research. Efforts to explore the psychosocial aspects of fire-setting have often been thwarted by variables beyond the control of the researcher, e.g., lack of arrestee data, and conviction rates of arsonists, the methods of reporting arson cases, legal constraints in the disclosure of information, and the inherent difficulty of acquiring access to evidence from-controlled sampling procedures. Few systematic studies of arsonists have been conducted, let alone by contemporary arson researchers.

Historically, the scientific study of arson and fire-setting behavior has been scattered and incomplete. Although 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." 18 Though much has been written on fire-setting behavior, the literature provides practically no data 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.

Overwhelming majority of arsonists are never identified or convicted. 19

Empirical studies in firesetting behavior intrinsically hinge on their accessibility to known arsonists. Research in this area is inherently biased and academically dependent on the interests and talents of those responsible for sitting through the ashes of configuration, identifying, apprehending and apprehending arsonists, and judicially prosecution 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 fire-setters or if the various psychological aspects extrapolated from the known arsonist population are typical of arsonists that are actually identified. This problem is best illustrated by Dr. Bernard Levin of the Center for Fire Research. "Unfortunately, our knowledge about the psychopathology of fire-setters is limited to those arsonists who are caught or give themselves up; in short, we know most about the least successful arsonists." 20 A 1977 report stated that arsonist rates for arsonists were low in comparison to those for other offenses or for some crimes related 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 proscribed and does not reflect their identities under other situations. 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 incarnation. Since it is common practice for criminalists and diversionists in their study of criminal and abnormal behavior to select their sample populations from prisons, juvenile reformatories, psychiatric facilities, and parole and probation bureaus, it is reasonable to anticipate that studies of arsonists would rely on similar environments and sample populations.

The conviction rate for arson has been estimated between 1 and 2 percent nationally. 21 For each 100 reported incendiary or suspicious fires, there are approximately two incidents 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.

How, however, attempts 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 probation or parole status are not likely to represent a cross section of the arsonist population. In fact, they 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 are generated principally by two factors—includes reporting and a lack of a centralized data collection and reporting system.

Traditionally, the law enforcement community has not assumed major responsibility for reporting, analyzing, and 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 "the arson offense be defined in the 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 the population of fires." Not only is little known about the 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 apprehension rate.

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. 21 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.

Reasons for the low conviction rate are multiplicity. In addition to the low apprehension rate of fire investigators, 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 to the mental health community for treatment. Still other fire investigators 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 plead bargain to lesser offenses or to some crimes related 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 proscribed and does not reflect their identities under other situations. 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.
Therefore, the number of reported arson cases has been steadily increasing, with a variety of losses due to property damage, estimated value of property damage, and whether the structure was insured. The property damage will be reported within the Part I offense classification. However, the total incidence of arson will not be reflected in the UCR, since suspicious and unknown-cause fires will not be reported. The systemic 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 insurance companies, 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. In addition, the current movement by the insurance industry to seek alternative solutions to this problem is the stimulation of the insurance industry should it further research in this area. 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. Researchers have also been restricted in their 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 the persons they need to assess. The narrower the sample population they are permitted to investigate, the more significant the bias of their studies.

Consequently, with regard to the arsonist in general, "little concrete knowledge exists regarding his personality 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."

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 researcher or investigator attempting to gain a clear understanding of firesetting behavior is often frustrated and confused 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 even acknowledges that much of the literature tends "to deal with only one or two motives and for a narrow age range." 15

Firesetters have also been labeled, classified, and grouped at the researcher's discretion. Unfortunately, the multiplicity of classification systems has often led to an unnecessarily broad and conflicting influence of the classifications. 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 the efforts of the classifications have evolved frequently confused the investigation.

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A survey of the literature on incendiary behavior reflects only scanty reference to these factors. One of the most quoted studies was published by James A. Ireland in 1970. However, his sample population of 138 convicted and paroled arsonists contained only 10 "insurance-claim firesetters." Other noted researchers have studied the arson profitor, 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 Apraisal, issued in 1979 by the Center for Fire Research, National Bureau of Standards, presents an excellent overview of the psychological and psychiatric 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 an act of rashness, and thus not of great interest from a psychological standpoint." 16

Establishment of Cause and Intent

Since fire is a natural phenomenon, the establishment of a motive without prior understanding of the cause, role, or type of fire is often simply impossible. As a result, the establishment of cause and intent is often impossible without prior investigator's discretion. Unfortunately, in the absence of sufficient evidence, 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 something 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 is defined as "the reason or cause why the offender committed the wrongful act, e.g., murder, rape, or arson."

Though motive, unlike intent (willfulness), is not an essential element in establishing criminal prosecution, it often lends credence and support to a theory. 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 the most likely suspect. However, searching the ruins of a configuration for an identifiable motive may prove to be futile. Firesetting is often a symptom of a highly complex behavioral problem. Consequently, the actual establishment of a motive 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 distorting 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, or the interpretation or premature and faulty interpretation of motive may prove to be fatal in reaching 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 conceivably possible 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 motivation. In fact, when questioned about his behavior, the arsonist may be unable to account for his crime. Psychiatric W. A. White concluded over 3 decades ago that the firesetter's failure to consider unconscious motivation was "probably the cause of much inadequacy in the understanding of human behavior" than any other one thing. 31
Although a tenant torches his apartment complex to get back at the landlord for 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," it the problem is that he may lack conscious awareness of why he is doing it.

Motive: Motives:  

Firesetting

Firesetting, also known as psychologically motivated arson, has traditionally been differentiated from motiveless firesetting (pyromania). According to Veerle and Walker in The Psychology of Firesetting: A Review and Appraisal, the psychological firesetters "generally are aware of some specific motive, or reason, for setting the fire...." They asked their subjects to write down five major headings 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 acts. Fitch and Porter noted that "the lack of motive is a translated by pyromaniacs." Lewis and Yannel in their study of pathology in firesetting referred to the "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 sensuous satisfaction." The pyromaniac is also said to be compulsively driven by an "incontro
deivable impulse" to set fires. Although the true extent of pyromania is unknown, authorities today do seem to recognize it as representing 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. Veerle and Walker have noted that the range of motives for the motivated firesetter is a striking feature of that category. In an attempt to study systematically the arsonist, the researchers have most often classified him according to his motive. These classifications have often enhanced the investigator in telescoping his investigation. The USFA, in an effort to facilitate the understanding and identification of motivational patterns, has developed 24 various classifications with their own respective characteristics and motivational aspects.

The Psychotic

The Psychotic arsonist is generally characterized as "compulsive" arsonist, expressing his sadistic tendencies. He can be driven by an underlying compulsive force that is not easily identified. The true extent of pyromania is unknown, although it is generally agreed that the percentage of firesetters who fit this category is small. The Psychotic arsonist is motivated by a variety of forces, including: (1) Revenge, (2) financial gain, (3) gain of emotional or stylized gain, (4) gain of attention and recognition, (5) embellishment of his deflated self-image, and (6) to obtain some sort of sexual pleasure.

The Psychopath

The Psychopath firesetter is a striking feature of this category. The Psychopath arsonist is driven by a variety of motives, including: (1) Revenge, (2) financial gain, (3) gain of emotional or stylized gain, (4) gain of attention and recognition, (5) embellishment of his deflated self-image, and (6) to obtain some sort of sexual pleasure.

The Extortionist

The Extortionist firesetter is motivated by a variety of motives, including: (1) Revenge, (2) financial gain, (3) gain of emotional or stylized gain, (4) gain of attention and recognition, (5) embellishment of his deflated self-image, and (6) to obtain some sort of sexual pleasure.

The Stripper

The Stripper firesetter is motivated by a variety of motives, including: (1) Revenge, (2) financial gain, (3) gain of emotional or stylized gain, (4) gain of attention and recognition, (5) embellishment of his deflated self-image, and (6) to obtain some sort of sexual pleasure.

The Criminal Firefighter

The Criminal Firefighter is motivated by a variety of motives, including: (1) Revenge, (2) financial gain, (3) gain of emotional or stylized gain, (4) gain of attention and recognition, (5) embellishment of his deflated self-image, and (6) to obtain some sort of sexual pleasure.

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