

Firefighter arson: part 1 – incidence and motives

Most studies investigating motives for arson have noted the phenomenon of fires being lit by the very people entrusted by the community with fighting them. The incidence of malicious firesetting by firefighters is invariably portrayed in the literature as quite rare, although direct research is limited. The NSW police service's Strikeforce Tronto investigated some 1,500 suspicious fires from 2001 to 2004. It resulted in 50 people being charged, 11 of them volunteer firefighters. To keep this in perspective, the 11 firefighters were from a population of 69,000 NSW Rural Fire Service members.

Despite the small number of incidents, the impact of firefighter arson can go well beyond the damage caused by the fire itself. The community relies on and trusts its fire services, and the lighting of fires by members of those services can undermine public confidence, particularly given the accompanying media attention. This can affect community support in very direct ways, such as funding of rural fire services. The fire service could suffer loss of morale or have its effectiveness compromised by the disruption of allegations and investigations. Damage to the fire service's reputation could interfere with its ability to attract high quality recruits.

When a firefighter turns arsonist, it will usually be out of a desire for excitement or as a way of gaining attention and recognition. A firefighter craving stimulation or activity may start a fire before reporting for duty. There are cases of firefighters who have started a fire, reported it and attended the fire with their unit in the hope of being seen as the hero who saves the community. In other cases the motive may be to gain self-esteem through a demonstration of power and control. Some fires may be lit by aggrieved firefighters who feel they have been treated badly in some way by their organisation or community. There will also be a few who start fires for profit, such as those seeking overtime payments or those paid on a piece-basis when they attend fires.

The USFA (2003), in its special report on firefighter arson, has suggested the need for proactive prevention and awareness programs to instil in new recruits and experienced members a zero-tolerance approach to firesetting behaviour. The keys to prevention, the USFA suggests, lie in recognising the problem, acknowledging the threat it poses to public safety and the credibility of the fire service, and implementing screening procedures for new recruits.

There are difficulties with screening, particularly for volunteer services, that remain to be fully investigated. Many Australian fire services have made positive steps by introducing criminal records checks for new members, and by acknowledging at all levels of the organisation that firefighter arson does occur. By bringing into the open a problem that was once hidden, the chances of reducing the incidence of this behaviour are greatly improved.

For more information:

Huff TG 1994. Fire-setting fire fighters: identifying and preventing arsonists in fire departments. Focus on: arson. *IAFC on scene* 8(15): 6–7

United States Fire Administration (USFA) 2003. *Firefighter arson: special report*. Maryland: USFA. <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/publications/tr-141.pdf>