

# Firesetting Motives

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In the aftermath of the devastating fires that swept through California in October 2003, there was a lot of interest in why someone would deliberately start a fire. Information compiled over time has allowed the motives of firesetters to be categorized in an attempt to better understand why these fires occur, and more importantly, to prevent future fires from occurring.

The prosecution of an arson fire does not require an identification of motive. However, motive is useful in the course of an investigation because it allows the scope of inquiry to be more defined. Persons potentially involved in the fire can be eliminated or identified for closer scrutiny depending upon their relationship to the event and how the fire will benefit or damage them.

The following is a review of the recognized categories of firesetting motives.

### **Crime concealment**

Crime concealment involves a fire used to conceal or erase physical evidence of an initial unrelated crime. For example, after a murder, the perpetrator may start a fire in an attempt to eliminate trace evidence, as well as the identity of the victim. Any crime committed can be followed up with a concealment fire.

### **Spite / revenge**

The spite / revenge fire is the deadliest of all firesetting motives because the target is most times a person, possibly a spouse or a business competitor. When examining the fire scene, the spite / revenge fire is sometimes identifiable by evidence of emotion, such as vandalism to personal effects or the location of the fire.

When the target of a fire is a pile of clothing on a bed, an examination of whether the clothing belongs to Mr. Victim or Mrs. Victim will give a good indication as to which one set the fire. With that thought, a past court case became more complicated when the owner of the clothing was not physically confirmed and a defense was raised that the accused was the victim, not the arsonist. Photographs of the clothing tags, showing the size and type of garment can be very helpful.

### **Fraud / profit**

Fraud / profit is an extremely active motive. There are many reasons that a fire will be used for this motive. A person who bought or leased a car and can't get out of the deal without owning money will sometimes resort to burning the vehicle, often times staging an auto theft where the vehicle is subsequently dumped and burned.

If the damage to the vehicle is extensive, it is difficult to confirm forced entry to the doors or ignition, or even if components are present or missing. One fairly common factor in the vehicle fraud fire; the owner usually takes valuable parts or components out of the vehicle to maximize the profit.

Finding these items in the possession of the owner, or witness observations that the owner was removing parts in the driveway prior to the vehicle

being "stolen" are good indicators of a fraud fire.

Businesses that have fraud fires might be attempting to liquidate due to losses, or remodel at the expense of the insurance company. An examination of business records can be helpful. Usually only a fixed number of people have keys to a business, so lack of forced entry requires an examination of those able to get inside without a key. Also, use information from the alarm company, which may not only show an entry, but which employee code was used to enter the business. On the other side of that equation is an alarm report that shows the alarm set correctly every night for the past six months, but on the night of the fire, the employee who closed forgot to arm the alarm and accidentally left the door unlocked.

The alarm company will monitor what the client pays for, even though the system is capable of more features. With some systems, even if there is no monitored alarm report of openings and closings, the internal memory in the panel will hold a set number of events, which can be downloaded and examined (most business owners aren't aware of this).

Other circumstantial information, like foreclosures or properties for sale, may indicate a fraud fire.

The profit aspect of fraud fires also includes the arsonist-for-hire who starts the fraud fire for the home or business owner.

### **Excitement**

Excitement fires occur for a number of reasons, sometimes for the pure excitement of seeing the fire and the resulting event of firefighters and police responding, and a crowd of people watching. Patterns can develop that center around the home and work schedule of the offender. The offender will probably have a criminal record and is most likely to be an unmarried white male in his twenties. Excitement firesetters are usually past juvenile firesetters.

The firesetter will sometimes be in the crowd of observers. If not in the crowd, the excitement firesetter often returns to the scene within 24 hours.

Included in this category are the security guards and other professions, in some cases the fire service, where the firesetter has a role in the incident after starting the fire. A security guard on the night shift who "discovers" and extinguishes a fire becomes a hero and has an exciting night. The new hero may also be given a better work location or more desirable work hours. In staged fires, a false scenario has to be developed by the firesetter. During the interview, closely scrutinize the story; fabricated stories rarely fit the circumstances completely. Either the physical inability to have observed the fire from the reported location, or an inaccurate description of the fire behavior can discredit the witness and open the line of questioning to the potential for a deliberate fire.

### **Extremist**

Extremism has become a problem in California over the last year. In the past, extremism was at best sporadic. Recent fires have been attributed to an earth rights group aiming at stopping the destruction of the environment. Many times the target is new construction that borders natural areas or manufactures that are considered pol-

luters of the environment.

Attacks on new construction are particularly troublesome because the exposed wood framing and the lack of compartmentalization creates fast and effective fires. Also, water supply and access can be a problem in these areas. The extremist firesetter is looking for credit and there are normally indicators on the scene that make clear the motive for the fire.

Identifying the group responsible is often times not the issue; they will claim responsibility through physical evidence on the scene or make public statements. Unfortunately, a group or organization cannot be arrested. The follow-up investigation will be an effort to identify the responsible individuals within the group.

Contacting other jurisdictions who have had similar fires can be helpful.

### **Vandalism**

Vandalism fires are most times started by juveniles. They can be part of an initiation or thoughtless acts aimed at a target of opportunity. The vandalism motive can overlap other motives, such as excitement, revenge, and crime concealment. For example, a group of juveniles may enter a school property and start a fire. It may appear to be revenge against the school or an attempt for attention. It may be an attempt to cover up another form of vandalism, which would be crime concealment.

Juvenile firesetters are also categorized in this group. Juvenile firesetting is the result of a natural curiosity and attraction to fire. When dealing with a juvenile firesetter, keep in mind that as adults we are not much different in mindset. Adults enjoy sitting around a campfire, staring into the flames. The fireplaces we have in our homes are not for heat, we like staring into those flames as well. The difference between adult and juvenile attraction to fire is that we have learned the appropriate places to make our fires.

There are acting-out aspects to some juvenile fires as well. There is much research and a wide array of training and treatment programs for the juvenile firesetter.

### **Pyromania**

Pyromania has consistently been argued by experts over the years. A mania is considered an uncontrollable urge, in this case involving fire. Most times, the repeat or serial arsonist starts many fires, but shows control in the timing and location of the fires. This causes some experts to believe that it is not pyromania. In any case, there are identified groups of psychological firesetters, those starting the fires for relief and others starting fires for sexual gratification.

The public and media will often focus on the sexual gratification firesetter, probably because the image is so sinister. However, although these firesetters have been identified and documented, they are very rare.

The more common psychological firesetter experiences a build-up of stress that is not relieved until a fire is set. The description given by these firesetters sounds similar to a person addicted to drugs. The need arises and will not go away until relieved by the act. The stresses may be due to

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The more common psychological firesetter experiences a build-up of stress that is not relieved until a fire is set. The description given by these firesetters sounds similar to a person addicted to drugs. The need arises and will not go away until relieved by the act. The stresses may be due to environmental circumstances or a history of abuse. The firesetter will realize the relief obtained by starting a fire, and then incorporate the ritual into their lives to cope with their individual problems.

One firesetter stated that he discovered starting fires helped when he went in the backyard after a family fight and lit a piece of paper on fire. Watching the fire made all of the stress go away; it felt like washing away the problem. After that, the firesetter would go to the backyard and light something on fire anytime the stress got bad. In time, the pieces of paper weren't enough and he started going into the alley to light larger things on fire, usually boxes or trashcans. Most likely, the size and frequency of the fires will escalate until some kind of intervention occurs.

### **Mixed motives**

The motives are not always clear cut. A firesetter who starts a revenge fire may do so because of underlying psychological tendencies. The arsonist-for-hire may also reveal indications of excitement, extremist, or vandalism characteristics in the physical evidence. This may be due to preexisting issues or an attempt to confuse the investigation. Investigators should evaluate the information in its totality and be aware of the possibility of deliberate or unintentional mixed motives.

### **Conclusion**

The origin and cause investigation is a systematic line of inquiry. Observations made during the origin and cause phases can greatly assist the