

Motives for committing arson: part 1 – general arson

Understanding why people commit antisocial acts is important for investigating offences and ensuring that perpetrators receive justice and treatment. There is an extensive literature considering the motives behind arson. While there are many different approaches to motives and classification of arson, and terminology can change between writers, taken as a whole the literature suggests the following common motives for arson:

- revenge, usually against an employer, lover or institution;
- excitement or relief of boredom;
- vandalism, often influenced by peer pressure;
- attention seeking, as a 'cry for help' or to gain recognition and 'hero status';
- financial gain, including insurance fraud and for other business purposes;
- crime concealment, often to remove physical evidence;
- political, as a form of protest or as a weapon of terror;
- no discernible motive, perhaps under the influence of a mental illness;
- mixed or unclear, where fire may achieve several purposes or the motive is not apparent; and
- child firesetting, which can differ in many ways from adult firesetting.

Revenge is a factor in many cases of arson. A sacked employee may burn down a company's premises. A jilted lover may respond by setting fire to a former partner's home or car. A troubled student may attack his or her school. Sometimes the anger may be displaced onto a more general target, such as a public facility or even a bushland area.

The sights and sounds of sirens, uniforms, equipment and action as fire services respond to a blaze can provide thrills and a source of activity that motivates some people to start fires. Some firesetters will start a fire then report it, and perhaps even become involved in suppressing it, in the hope of being seen as a hero. Others may find starting a fire creates a feeling of power or control to boost their self-esteem.

The role of mental illness in firesetting can be complex and it cannot be assumed that all firesetters are mentally disturbed. Even if an arsonist has a psychiatric disability, this may not have been a contributing factor in the firesetting behaviour, or may have only been one of many factors. Although 'pyromania' is a commonly used term and an established psychiatric diagnosis, there are very few true pyromaniacs and some writers argue whether it should be a diagnostic category at all.

A range of studies suggests that most arsonists have family and relationship problems and deficits in normal social interactions, employment and academic performance. Most studies have found typical arsonists to be of limited intelligence but this finding may be more an indication of those relatively few arsonists who are convicted than the overall arsonist population.

For more information:

Willis M 2004. *Bushfire arson: a review of the literature*. Research and public policy series no 61. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology