

## ***The use of profiling in bushfire arson: part 1—offender profiling***

Profiling: ‘... an educated attempt to provide investigative agencies with specific information as to the type of individual who committed a certain crime...’ (Geberth 1996: 710).

Criminal behaviour profiling, as seen in movies such as *Silence of the Lambs*, holds a particular fascination within our society. Its allure lies in the promise of being able to use the evidence from a crime scene to paint a picture of the likely offender. While the reality may not quite match the popular depiction, profiling has been used successfully in solving serious crimes such as serial arson, rape and murder. Profiling is an investigative tool which attempts to understand criminal behaviour through the characteristics of the offence and the manner of its commission. When offences such as serial arson are committed, there are many clues behavioural scientists and police can use to build a profile, such as:

- preparation—did the offender prepare an ignition device and bring fuel, or just use what could be found at the scene;
- how the fire was set—did the offender set multiple ignitions and was there a pattern;
- choice of target—was the ignition point randomly selected, or did the offender make decisions in selecting the location; and
- concealment—did the offender make efforts to conceal their activities.

Profiling takes an analysis of the offence and the offender’s actions before, during and after the crime and compares these with the characteristics of known personality types and psychiatric disabilities to develop a practical working description of the offender. Together with other tools such as witness reports and physical evidence, a profile can help focus an investigation by narrowing the field of suspects. A profile will contain information about the likely offender such as: age, sex, race, marital status, socio-economic level; occupational ability and type of employment; educational achievement and intellectual ability; arrest/legal history; family characteristics, social interests and habits; location of home residence in relation to crime scene; and possible psychological disorders.

There are a number of assumptions inherent within the profiling process (Holmes and Holmes 1996), including that:

- the crime scene reflects the personality of the offender;
- the method of operation remains similar;
- the crime ‘signature’ remains the same; and
- the offender’s personality will not change.

The reliance on these assumptions means that only certain types of offence are suitable for profiling. There must be discernible psychological factors underlying the offending and a discrete crime scene which can produce evidence of the offender’s personality profile.

### **References**

- Geberth V 1996. *Practical homicide investigation*, 3rd ed. New York NY: CRC Press
- Holmes RM & Holmes ST 1996. *Profiling violent crimes: an investigative tool*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage