

The use of profiling in bushfire arson: part 2—vandalism and excitement

Based on similarities in traits, behaviours and attributes, the FBI (Douglas et al. 1992) and National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (Sapp et al. n.d.) have developed offender profiles for specific arson motives. No single offender is likely to display all of these characteristics, but it is likely that many of the attributes, traits and behaviours listed below will be present within bushfire arsonists lighting fires on the basis of these motives.

Vandalism-motivated	Excitement-motivated
Fire lit with the motive of wilful, mischievous, wanton destruction; often result of boredom or frustration	The excitement motivated arsonist seeks thrills (T-type), attention (A-type) or recognition (R-type)
Male, juvenile—young adult	Usually male, juvenile
Usually multiple offenders	Multiple offenders rare
Uses available materials, matches/cigarette lighters	Uses available materials; matches/cigarette lighters. Serial R-type: may use incendiary devices and time delays
Spontaneous/disorganised	Serial T-type commonly leaves matches at scene
Opportunist; won't break into buildings to light fires	Serial T-type: target selection premeditated/planned; cause major conflagrations; Serial A-type: minimum damage targets; Serial R-type: nuisance type fires, variable locations
Lower-middle socioeconomic status	Lower-middle socioeconomic status
Poor school performance; average – below average intelligence	10 years+ formal education; unemployed; Serial R-type have highest overall education
Fire set within one mile from home/base; familiar surrounds	Generally walks to scene; typically less than 1–2 miles; familiar location
Lives with father and mother in single-family housing; serial vandalism motivated arsonists often have long history of institutionalisation	Serial T-type: commonly have extensive history of institutionalisation; emotionally inadequate
Prior contact with police/fire department	Prevalent contact with police/fire department, felony arrest record; little consideration given to getting caught; would do it anyway. Serial T-type prolific—may light more than 50 fires before being caught
Usually flees scene and does not return; if they return, usually views out of sight or from a safe distance	Serial T-type: leaves scene, views from elsewhere; Serial A-type & R-type may remain. All subgroups generally return within 24 hours; Serial R-type often actively participates in reporting or fighting the fire. May be affiliated with public safety organisation
For serial arsonists frequency will probably remain relatively stable, but severity may increase over time	Serial offenders common; frequency may increase—severity is almost certain to increase over time

References

- Douglas JE et al. 1992. *Pocket guide to the crime classification manual*. New York: Lexington Books
- Sapp AD et al. n.d. *A motive-based offender analysis of serial arsonists*.
http://www.interfire.org/features/serialarsonists/Motive_based/cover.asp (viewed 14 December 2005)