

Firesetting behaviour: applying the dynamic-behavioural model

Bushfires can leave communities angry and bewildered, particularly when they are found to have been maliciously lit. This anger can lead to demands for harsh and vengeful punishments of the perpetrators, who are often young people. Some of these not only go against the rule of law and the moral standards of the community, they would be likely to exacerbate the problems which have led to the firesetting. This in turn could increase the chances of the young person committing further criminal activity.

To provide balance and introduce further options to the debate, the organisation Youth Off The Streets (YOTS) has drawn on the dynamic-behavioural model of firesetting of Kenneth Fineman (1995), discussed in the previous Bulletin, to develop a treatment model that links specific aspects of treatment with particular types of firesetters. YOTS proposed several types of firesetter. They include a 'bushfire firesetter type'; that is individuals who set fires in forests, bush or open areas, with the intention of fires spreading to inhabited areas or not caring if they do, and having little consideration for the risk of injury to humans or animals. Bushland firesetters are seen as at risk of continued firesetting, but treatable if caught.

Applying Fineman's dynamic-behavioural model with other literature on treatment issues for arsonists, YOTS proposed the establishment of a residential treatment program for different categories of firesetter as an alternative to other outcomes such as conferencing or detention. YOTS identified the following elements as critical to a treatment program for bushland firesetters:

- assertiveness training, for conflict resolution and self-esteem
- social skills training, for better interpersonal relationships and problem-solving skills
- Bumpass technique, to recognise and deal with triggering emotions
- substance abuse treatment as needed
- relaxation techniques, for anger and stress management
- traditional, supportive and cognitive behavioural psychotherapy, for historic and ongoing issues
- story-telling-relaxation and role-play, to express and respond to problems appropriately
- depression therapy
- medication consultation to review treatments, and
- marital and family treatment, identified by YOTS as frequently needed.

Although evaluation would be needed to determine the effectiveness of the program, the treatment elements identified by YOTS address some key factors shown to contribute to firesetting behaviour. Importantly, they take into account issues and problems in the firesetter's history, essential if any effort to deal with firesetting behaviour is to be successful.

For more information

Youth Off The Streets. *Juvenile fire setter intervention project: an alternative for magistrates.*

At: <http://www.youthoffthestreets.com.au/ourprograms/firesettersprogram.htm> (accessed 4 February 2006).