

## ***The use of fire in homicide***

Homicides which involve the use of fire are believed to be quite rare, although cases such as the Childers Backpacker Hostel fire in 2000 in which 15 people died, serve to focus attention on the crime. When associated with homicide, fire may be the weapon used to commit the homicide, or may be involved after the homicide. Fire that is used post-mortem may be intended to conceal the homicide, destroy evidence, dispose of the body or prevent identification of the victim.

One study examined data on 183 cases of arson-homicide across the United States and found that the victims were more likely to be females than males, and in the group aged 18–29 years. In most cases (70%) burns were post-mortem, and females were more likely to suffer post-mortem burning (80%) than males (60%). Post-mortem burning was also more likely if the victim was found outside. It should be cautioned, however, that the sample was non-random, and consisted largely of unsolved cases referred to the FBI, which are not necessarily representative of all arson homicides (Sapp & Huff 1994).

A more comprehensive recent study examined 269 incidents of fire-associated homicides in Chicago between 1965 and 1995 involving 461 victims, representing 1.2 percent of all homicides and 1.9 percent of homicide victims in the time period. It included cases in which a fire was set which killed the victim, when the victim themselves was set on fire, and cases where the victim was killed in some other way and a fire was set to conceal the crime. The study found that juvenile victims were overrepresented in the fire-associated homicides, with 24 percent of the victims less than 16 years, compared with eight percent for all other homicides. Victims were most likely to be in the group aged 0-9 years. Female victims were also overrepresented in fire-associated homicides. Juveniles were no more likely to be offenders in fire-associated homicides than in homicides generally. The researchers found that fire-associated homicides were more likely than other homicides to be cleared, such as through the arrest of a suspect, and speculate that the additional resources directed at these homicides, including the police and fire investigators, led to the offender being more likely to be identified. Clearance rates were lower when fire was used to destroy the crime scene or evidence. Although the study did not consider the victim-offender relationship, the authors state that the use of fire to kill could be considered to be 'overkill', which is frequently found in intimate partner homicide (Drake & Block 2003).

In general, few studies have focused on fire-associated homicide, and the state of knowledge on the topic is quite poor. Although such homicides are infrequent, they require extensive collaboration between investigative agencies and can be resource intensive. Further information on fire-associated homicides may help inform investigation of these crimes, and their prevention.

### **References**

Drake D & Block C 2003. An evaluation of arson-associated homicide in Chicago 1965 to 1995, in *Public health and criminal justice approaches to homicide research: proceedings of the 2003 Homicide Research Working Group Annual Symposium*. <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/HRWG/PDF/hrwg03>

Sapp AS & Huff TG 1994. *Arson-homicides: findings from a national study*. Washington DC: National Centre for Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation.