



BushFIRE Arson Bulletin

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Copycat or serial arson?

Like many crimes, bushfire arson exhibits clustering (ie multiple offences committed in a short space of time). A recent study found evidence that in Florida, arson events are clustered over periods of up to 11 days (Prestemon & Butry 2005). The tight clustering of suspicious or incendiary bushfire ignitions observed in many parts of Australia suggests that this may also be occurring locally (Bryant 2008).

Clustering is proposed to result from serial offending or copycat behaviour. Discriminating between these explanations is generally based on interviews with offenders. For building (structural) arson, a study of offenders has shown that a high proportion set multiple fires within a short timeframe (Sapp et al 1996; see Willis 2004 for a more complete treatment of serial arson). It seems reasonable to hypothesise that bushfire arsonists might behave similarly. There is some evidence of serial bushfire arson, such as the case of a firefighter who lit at least 25 fires in Australia in 2001–02 (AIC 2005). In contrast, AIC research using NSW court data (Muller 2008) found very low levels of repeat offending for arsonists and bushfire arsonists but relating this to serial arson behaviour is complicated by low capture rates and other factors. Overall, bushfire arsonists are rarely apprehended, so it is not possible to determine accurately whether serial offending behaviour is the cause of this clustering.

Early speculation on copycat arson by Crowe (1999) and others has been supported by some evidence supporting other copycat criminal behaviour: Heller and Polsky (1976) interviewed 100 male general offenders and found that 22 percent reported copying techniques they had seen in crime shows on television, while a further 22 percent said they had contemplated doing so. More recently, Surette (2002) surveyed 68 serious and violent offenders and found that about a quarter of them had attempted a copycat crime. He argues that offenders were more likely to pick up techniques, rather than criminal tendencies, from observing others. Further, he noted that much more work is needed to improve the understanding of copycat crime, and this is certainly true for copycat arson, where the research is yet to be undertaken.

References

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