



A Tangled Web:

by Dali Hoover

Responders Struggle to Stop Juvenile Firesetting

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Kids starting fires. The problem is so complex that few of the stakeholders see the big picture, according to Irene Pinsonneault, coordinator of the Massachusetts Coalition for Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Programs.

Fire, EMS and police departments; schools, government agencies and parents lack a common understanding of the problem, Pinsonneault said. "People in the court system just see the kids who go through the courts; they don't see the [younger] kids or more disturbed kids. The folks who run mental health clinics see only the disturbed kids. People who work in schools see a whole range of kids who may have relationships with fire, but the schools have no mechanism to capture that information," Pinsonneault said. "None of these professionals, even if they recognize a problem with firesetting, envisions the same kid. It's a challenge to get everyone to see the complexity and comprehensiveness of the problem."

Lack of Data Makes It Worse

Even the numbers related to juvenile firesetting are difficult to grasp. The available data does not tell the whole story.

Most of the information comes from state and local sources, such as Pinsonneault's Massachusetts coalition. But reliable statistics on the national level are lacking, because reporting, identification and response processes vary widely from locale to locale.

For example, FBI statistics consistently report that juvenile firesetters account for half or more of those arrested each year for arson nationwide. According to the FBI's annual Crime in the U.S. report, in 1999, 35.8 percent of all persons arrested for arson were younger than 15, and 6.9

percent of persons arrested for arson were younger than 10.

According to David Wilcox, Ed.D., clinical coordinator for the Massachusetts coalition, firesetting behavior is much more common than the FBI's statistics show. In many cases, no one calls the fire department. Often, the child, parents or others extinguish small juvenile-set fires themselves. In some cases, the parents never even find out that their child has started a fire.

According to Massachusetts coalition, 74 percent of the fires set by children who have been referred to its program were reported to an adult. That means 26 percent of those fires went unreported. Of the 74 reported cases, only 11 percent involved a fire department response. Without a fire department response, an arson arrest is unlikely, and the FBI's statistics only track arrests.

According to Don Porth, director of public education for Portland Fire & Rescue in Oregon, national arson figures are misleading because of culpability and age issues. In the past 10 years, Porth estimates only 28 percent of the children who participated in Portland's juvenile firesetting program would qualify as being able to commit a crime.

"A 2-year-old can't be charged with a crime of arson: The threshold is between 7 and 12 years of age. Most local jurisdictions deem 12-year-olds accountable for their actions, and therefore, accountable for a crime," Porth explained. "That's a small subset of the number of kids setting fires. So FBI arson statistics are not very telling."

because they don't cover the issue broadly."

Porth's goal is to acquire funds for a national database that would capture data in a consistent manner from juvenile fire-setting programs around the country. Such standardization would allow accurate community comparisons and provide great detail about the juvenile segment of firesetting.

"Prevention is all about knowing and understanding what the cause is so you can design and deliver education, engineering solutions and enforcement solutions to overcome the problem," Porth said.

No Simple Solution

The lack of clear national data contributes to the splintered approach that most organizations, such as schools, social services and emergency services departments have taken on the issue: Each agency is able to see only a small corner of a massive, complicated problem. The result is ineffective treatment of the problem, according to John Hall, Ph.D., assistant vice president, Fire Analysis and Research Division, National Fire Protection Association.

While the behavior is essentially consistent with juvenile firesetting the root causes of the behavior vary widely from child to child. According to Hall, the best approach is a multifaceted program that uses a diagnostic process to determine the treatment and response that are appropriate to a particular child's special circumstances.

"Juvenile firesetting runs the gamut — from kids acting out in anger because of physical or sexual abuse, to socialization or school problems, to traumatic family events, to mental illness. At the other extreme, juvenile gangs use arson as a weapon to establish sales territories for their drug distribution businesses," Hall said.

The Massachusetts coalition, with 17 multidisciplinary treatment networks in the state, is one such multifaceted program. The coalition promotes interagency cooperation, provides technical assistance to communities, helps coordinate resources in the communities and provides leadership to organizations.

What distinguishes the coalition from other programs is that it creates a platform for all agencies that deal with these children and their families to coordinate efforts. A multidisciplinary team manages the coalition. The team includes fire service, law enforcement, mental health, social services, business and community leaders.

Whole Community Must Pitch In

A trend toward a multifaceted approach is spreading. The state of Oregon has community-based juvenile firesetter networks similar to the Massachusetts coalition. Judith Okulitch is the program coordinator of the Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Program for the Office of the State Fire Marshal,

or OSFM, in Oregon. For the past 10 years, she has helped to develop a continuum of care for these networks throughout the state's 36 counties.

She works cooperatively with local fire services to identify each community's key resources, including juvenile court, mental health and child welfare agencies, insurance organizations and schools. Organizing these local networks generally takes six months to a year before interagency agreements are written, formalized and signed.

Pat Mieszala, R.N., president of Burn Concerns in Burbank, Calif., and a longtime advocate of multidisciplinary intervention programs nationally, assists communities in setting up multiagency-coordinated programs for juvenile firesetting and works closely with organizations that deal with injury prevention and fire safety and burn prevention, such as the NFPA and U.S. Fire Administration.

According to Mieszala, training only fire service personnel about this issue isn't enough: All community services must be trained to better understand the children who set fires and to learn how to identify these children for early intervention.

Getting the message out is part of the job. "Juvenile firesetting programs must tell parents, educators, daycare providers, seniors and babysitters that if they see kids setting fires, they need to take the behavior seriously," Mieszala said.

One critical access point is the school system. "Schools prefer to handle firesetting problems internally. They don't want to draw attention to fires that happen at school. But we need to hear about those fires, whether bathroom fires, trash can fires, dumpster fires or playground fires. Then we can provide appropriate intervention for those children," Okulitch said.

To increase public awareness, Oregon's OSFM offers educational curricula, school programs and a parent responsibility booklet in four languages. "Parents tend to minimize this behavior, especially if it's a small fire. So we educate them about arson laws; reckless burn laws; the consequences their kids would face if cited for one of those charges; the juvenile court process; and the restitution and fines owed," Okulitch said.

Another Road: Enforcement

Six years ago, Indianapolis moved its juvenile firesetter program from the fire prevention unit to a joint police-fire department arson unit. Members include police officers who train at the fire academy and firefighters who train at the police academy. These firefighters have all police powers and carry weapons. When on the scene of a fire, the fire investigator determines the fire's origin and cause, while the police officer talks to the families and witnesses.

According to Barbara Spurlin, Firestop Coordinator, Indianapolis Fire Department and Fire Investigation Unit, an investigation team reports to the scene of any juvenile-set fire, regardless of its size. The team determines if the child should be adjudicated or sent through the department's Firestop Program. "Attendance at our program has increased significantly since it moved to the arson unit, because now parents don't have a choice," Spurlin said.

Indianapolis' Firestop Program includes a two-hour interview with the child and family. The child and parents view an age- and incident-appropriate video, while Spurlin determines necessary counseling referrals. Parents also receive instruction about fireproofing their homes.

Inaction is Not an Option

Responders and the community they serve must understand that, for juvenile firesetters, some kind of intervention is absolutely necessary, or the problem will get worse.

Carol Gross, program manager of the Phoenix Fire Department's Youth Firesetter Intervention Program, told EVERY SECOND COUNTS, "I can say with certainty that if there is no intervention, the firesetting behavior will continue, and it will most likely escalate. We've got to get these kids into an educational intervention class, and if the family agrees, we get them into counseling at no cost."

Gross emphasized the importance of therapy because children set fires for many reasons. "We had a youngster setting fire to the back seat of his father's car. After building a rapport with his counselor, he confessed that the reason he sets fires is because an older neighborhood boy was molesting him in the back seat of the car. He had no way to verbalize his experience, so he cried out for help by setting fires."

Watch for Warning Signs

While the complexity of juvenile firesetting behavior is daunting, fire and emergency service personnel can take an active role by staying alert to signs of this behavior.

According to Mieszala of Burn Concerns, parents often tell emergency workers that they have found burn marks underneath the mattress or on the carpet beneath the child's bed, or a pile of burned matches in the closet. "Those are signals people love to brush away, but those are signs of a child in trouble."

Everyone in the emergency response field has a stake in this issue, said Porth of Portland Fire & Rescue. "Any response by an emergency medical services professional needs to include looking for risks — burn spots in different places, ignition sources left within easy reach of kids, or kids playing with those materials. Any interaction with the public provides opportunities for all professionals to be thoughtful and aware of potential behaviors like firesetting." ■

Four Firesetting Behavior Profiles

Firesetting behavior is classified into four categories, depending on the child's age and motivation:

Curiosity: Includes children 3 to 7, predominantly boys, with poor impulse control or hyperactivity, who are very curious and learn by doing, intend no harm or damage, and may seek help or try to extinguish fire.

According to David Wilcox, Ed.D., of the Massachusetts Coalition for Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Programs, in more than 80 percent of cases that involve curiosity firesetting handled by the coalition, the behavior stops after the child and caretakers receive educational intervention.

Crisis: Includes mostly males between 5 to 15, although the number of females is rising. The child often intends damage. The object of the fire may be symbolic, usually related to family stressors. The child may have other psychiatric symptoms, history of impulsive or aggressive behavior, poor self-esteem and poor coping skills.

These children are in crisis, feel disempowered and are unable to express their feelings appropriately. "So they find the one thing that grabs everyone's attention, but it also sends the signal that something is terribly wrong," Wilcox said. "A lot of other issues are always uncovered."

Delinquent: Includes older males or females 10 to 16, who set fires in conjunction with their peers, usually in a "crisis profile" for years, who may want to harm others or destroy property. Experimentation with accelerants is likely, as is a history of defying authority, possible gang involvement, cruel behavior without remorse, and a refusal to take responsibility for actions.

"If the peer group voices its approval for the behavior, then trying to change the behavior will be difficult. These adolescents start doing wild things with fire," Wilcox said. Peer counselors — kids who know firsthand the dangers of fire — are the best intervention strategy for delinquent firesetters. These counselors can foster peer approval for being safe and smart.

Pathological: Includes mostly males 12 to adulthood, who collect fire tools and have a repetitive firesetting pattern, are destructive of their own and others' property, have poor peer and interpersonal skills, perform poorly in school, have a history of aggressive behavior, tend to blame others, and have a chaotic family life that may include psychiatric illness, possible history of physical or sexual abuse, and low self-esteem masked by narcissism.

According to Wilcox, this behavior profile is rare. In the past 12 years of his working with the coalition, only about 10 cases out of 60 belonged to this severe classification.