AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE
SELF-REPORTED MOTIVATIONS OF STUDENTS WHO SET SCHOOL FIRES

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF THE
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JANET A. BOBERG

Student-set school fires are a growing problem in Phoenix, Arizona area schools. In 1999, 12 students were referred to the Phoenix Fire Department Youth Firesetter Intervention Program for setting school fires. In 2005, that number dramatically increased to 99 school firesetter referrals, even though the total number of firesetter referrals increased by only 3%. Both the increase in the number of school fire referrals and a lack of previous research were the impetus for this exploratory case study. This study explored the motives of 17 school firesetter informants referred to the Phoenix Fire Department Youth Firesetter Intervention Program for setting school fires.

In-depth interviews were conducted to gain insight into the motives of these 17 school firesetters. Firesetter informants and their parent(s) or guardian(s) were identified through purposeful sampling. Interviews with the informant’s parent(s) or guardian(s) were also conducted to verify the information obtained from the school firesetters. School, Youth Firesetter and Juvenile Court Referral forms were used to gain the perspective of the school administrators. Validity and reliability were addressed through two bracketing interviews, data triangulation, member-checking, and established techniques of qualitative data analysis.
The research revealed that students set school fires for various reasons, including, a desire to be entertained, boredom, external and internal peer pressure, to watch fire burn, anger at a teacher or parent, because they were cold, out of impulsivity or for no reason at all. Not one of the school firesetters reported that his or her school fire was based on a dislike of school or a desire to burn down the school building.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation is a life-changing experience and without the encouragement, help, and support of a number of people, it would never have come to fruition. It is with heartfelt gratitude that I acknowledge and thank the following people who were such catalysts in my dissertation process.

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And finally, to all of those people who encouraged me throughout this process, your inspiration is what guided me, and I am truly grateful to all of you.

Although this study is completed, it has opened the door for others to continue to strive to gain a better understanding of what motivates students to set school fires.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: My father John R. Boberg, my mother Yvonne C. Boberg, and my brother Thomas J. Boberg.

Dad, thank you for teaching me the importance of patience, persistence, perseverance, and humor. Without each of these traits I would never have been able to complete this journey. I think of you and miss you every day.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Fires are not supposed to happen, but when they do and people die, they can affect an entire community. Never was this more apparent than on December 1, 1958, when Chicago and the nation experienced one of the most heart-breaking tragedies in United States history. On that day a fire enveloped the half-century-old Our Lady of the Angels parochial school on Chicago’s west side, leaving 92 students and three nuns dead.

(Cowan, 2001 p. 87)

The investigation into the cause of the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School became stagnant until 1961, when a 13-year-old boy came to the attention of the Cicero, Illinois police and fire departments after being seen at the scene of various apartment fires in the Cicero, Illinois area. During an investigation into this boy’s background, the investigators found that he had set his first fire at age five when he set a garage near his home on fire by holding a match in front of a spray can, making a torch. They found that his academic record revealed poor school attendance, low grades, deplorable school behavior, and his teachers regarded him as a troublemaker. The most important finding was that he was attending Our Lady of the Angels School on the day of the school fire (Cowan & Kuenster, 1996).

After an investigation into his background, the boy looked like a viable suspect in the various Cicero area fires. While being interviewed by police about the Cicero
apartment fires, the boy not only admitted to the apartment fires but also to setting the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School December 1, 1958. Because of his admittance to the fires, his parents requested that he be given a polygraph examination to prove which fires, if any, he had started. During the polygraph interview and examination, the boy confessed to starting the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School. He stated the reason for this fire was because “I hated my teachers and my principal. They always were threatening me. They always wanted to expel me from school” (Cowan & Kuenster, 1996, p. 200).

After the interview and polygraph examination, the boy was charged with the fires and referred to the Family Court of Chicago for disposition of the firesetting incidents. After the court hearing the judge found him not responsible for the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School (possibly because of political reasons); however, he was found responsible for the other fires and was sent to a boy’s home out of state (Cowan & Kuenster, 1996). No further history on the boy was available.

The fire at Our Lady of the Angels School and its subsequent investigation prompted the following questions: Do most students who set school fires do so because they dislike school, the teachers, and/or administrative staff? Are most students who set school fires troubled students with poor attendance records, low grades, and poor school behavior? How frequently do school fires occur in the United States? In Phoenix, Arizona? And what does the current research say about the motivations of school firesetters?

In 2002 there were an estimated 14,300 fires in kindergarten through 12th grade educational institutions in the United States, causing an estimated $103,600,000 in
property damage and 122 injuries (FEMA, 2004). In Phoenix, Arizona, there was an 87% increase in the number of school firesetter referrals received by the Phoenix Fire Department’s (PFD) Youth Firesetter Intervention (YFS) Program from 1999 through 2005 (Phoenix Fire Department, 2006). In fact, referrals from school administrators were much higher than the referrals in general over the same period of time.

In 1999, the PFD’s YFS Program received a total of 395 youth firesetter referrals from a range of sources, including but not limited to, fire investigators, fire companies, parents and family members, schools, police, mental health, and other social service agencies. In 2005, the PFD’s YFS Program received a total of 408 youth firesetter referrals from schools, fire investigations, fire companies, parents and family members, schools, police, mental health, and other social service agencies (PFD, 2006). The difference in the number of firesetter referrals from 1999 to 2005 shows only a 3% increase in the number of total referrals received, nothing near the increase in the number of school-generated firesetter referrals received during that same time period.

A closer look at the school firesetter referrals received from January 1, 1999, through December 31, 2005, revealed that the PFD’s YFS Program received 478 youth firesetter referrals from Phoenix area schools regarding students who set school fires. Eighty-two percent of these students were not required by the school administrator to attend a youth firesetter intervention program, so accurate data on these school firesetters could not be obtained (PFD, 2006).

The large increase in the number of school firesetter referrals received by the PFD’s YFS Program and the fact that so many firesetters (82%) were not mandated to attend a youth firesetter program, made me even more curious about the research on the
motivations of school firesetters. Ironically, after a comprehensive review of the literature, it was found that there was a significant lack of research regarding the motivations of school firesetters.

Purpose of the Study

The fire at Our Lady of the Angels School was and still is the most horrific school fire in the history of the United States. What makes it even more tragic is the fact that the fire was set by a troubled fifth-grade student who reported that the reason for the fire was because he hated his teachers and principal. Further investigation by the police and a polygraph examiner revealed that the boy believed if he burned down the school, he would not have to attend school anymore (Reid, 1962).

The purpose of this study was to gain access to and insight from students who set school fires, to understand the motivation for school fires and to determine if school firesetters experienced academic, school behavior or mental health problems prior to their firesetting incident. The information gained could then be used by the fire service and school administrators to develop a plan to identify students who may have the potential to set school fires, before they actually set a school fire.

Research Questions

In order to examine the motivations of school firesetters, the research included a description and analysis of 17 cases of school firesetters. This was accomplished by interviewing 17 students ages 10 through 17, who set school fires in and around Phoenix, Arizona, between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006. A multiple-case, case study design was chosen in order to incorporate the stories of 17 school-firesetter cases into one study.
Stake (1995) wrote, “A case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Merriam (1998) stated that a case is “selected for its uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to” (p. 33).

The following four research questions and corresponding subquestions were used to guide this investigation.

Research Question 1: What are the academic, school behavior, and mental health profiles of students who set school fires?

1a. What is the mean age of school firesetter informants?
1b. What is the mean grade point average of school firesetter informants?
1c. In what extracurricular activities do school firesetter informants report being involved in?
1d. Do the school firesetter informants report having school problems prior to starting the school fire? If so, what types of problems?
1e. What type of school suspension or expulsion history has the school firesetter informant experienced prior to the school fire?
1f. What mental health issues do the school firesetter informants report prior to the firesetting incident?
1g. How does the school firesetter informant talk about his or her relationship to school?

Research Question 2: What reasons do students give for setting fires at school?

2a. How does the school firesetter informant explain the circumstances surrounding his or her school fire?
2b. What is the main reason the school firesetter informant gives for setting the school fire?

2c. What additional reason(s) does the school firesetter informant give for the school fire?

Research Question 3: What do school firesetters say may prevent them and other students from setting future school fires?

3a. What does the school firesetter informant conjecture about setting another fire?

3b. What would prevent the school firesetter informant from setting another school fire?

3c. From the perspective of the school firesetter informant, what can fire departments and schools do to stop students from setting school fires in the future?

Research Question 4: How do the findings of the motivations of school firesetters compare with previous research on the motivation of firesetters in general?

4a. How has the motivation for school firesetting been categorized in this research?

4b. How do these categories align with the motivation categories identified in previous research on youth firesetting in general?

Definition of Terms

*Arson:* The crime of purposely setting fire to another’s building or property, or to one’s own, as to collect insurance (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 77).
**Arson of a structure or property:** A person commits arson of a structure or property by knowingly and unlawfully damaging a structure or property by knowingly causing a fire or explosion. Class 4 felony” (Arizona Revised Statute 13-1703, Title 13 Criminal Code, Arson).

**Arson of an occupied structure:** A person commits arson of an occupied structure by knowingly and unlawfully damaging an occupied structure by causing a fire or explosion. Class 2 felony” (Arizona Revised Statute 13-1704, Title 13 Criminal Code, Arson).

**Catalyst:** A person or thing acting as the stimulus in bringing about or hastening a result (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 220).

**Device:** A mechanical invention or contrivance for some specific purpose (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 376).

**Fire:** The active principal of burning, characterized by the heat and light of combustion (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 508).

**Fire-raising:** The act of setting a fire.

**Firesetting:** The act of setting a fire.

**Fireworks prohibited:** Except as otherwise provided by this article, it is unlawful to sell, offer or expose for sale, use, explode or possess any fireworks” (State of Arizona Laws, Arizona Revised Statute 36-1602; cited by Martin, 2003, pp. 77, 744).

**Ignition:** (1) Setting on fire or catching on fire; (2) The means by which a thing is ignited (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 670).

**Incendiary:** Setting on fire (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 377).
**Incendiary device:** A mechanical contrivance or invention that starts a fire (examples; matches, lighter, stove, etc.; Neufeldt, 1988, p. 680).

**Incident:** Something that happens; happening; occurrence (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 682).

**Intervene:** To come between as an influencing force, as in order to modify, settle, or hinder some action, argument, etc. (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 707).

**Intervention:** Specific services, activities or products developed and implemented to change or improve program participants’ knowledge, attitudes, behavior or awareness. Intervention is a purposeful response to an event where a child was exposed to violence. The intervention can be acute, when services are provided at the scene of the exposure, or the intervention can be provided after the event has already occurred. Interventions can take many forms and involve the action of a variety of professionals. Clinicians, teachers, parents, clergy, police, courts, and a variety of other individuals may provide interventions. There are at least two goals of an intervention; to provide support to the individual or persons who have been affected by the exposure to violence, and to find immediate solutions to practical problems that arise from, or gave rise to, the traumatic, disruptive, violent experience (NCCEV Glossary of Terms, 2006, p. 2).

**Juvenile Firesetter:** A youth under the age of 18 who accidentally or purposely starts a fire (PFD, 2006).

**Law:** All of the rules of conduct established and enforced by the authority, legislation, or custom of a given community, state, or other group (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 765).
**Lighter:** A person or thing that lights something or starts it burning (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 782).

**Matches:** A slender piece of wood, cardboard, waxed cord, etc., tipped with a composition that catches fire by friction, sometimes only when rubbed on a specifically prepared surface (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 834).

**Motivation:** To provide with or affect as, a motive or motives; incite or impel (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 886).

**Motive:** Some inner drive, impulse, intention, etc., that causes a person to do something or act in a certain way; incentive; goal (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 886).

**Occupied structure:** Means any structure as defined in paragraph four (any building, object, vehicle, watercraft, or place with sides and a floor, used for lodging, business, transportation, recreation, or storage) in which one or more human beings either are or are likely to be present or so near as to be in equivalent danger at the time the fire or explosion occurs (Martin, 2003, p. 77).

**Problem:** Presenting a problem of human conduct or social relationships (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 1072). School problem would be any situation causing the student distress that emanates from his or her school.

**Pyromania:** A pattern of deliberate setting of fires for pleasure or satisfaction derived from the relief of tension experienced before the fire-setting (Gale, 2006).

**Reckless burning:** “A. A person commits reckless burning by recklessly causing a fire or explosion, which results in damage to an occupied structure, a structure, wildland or property. Class 1 misdemeanor” (Arizona Revised Statute 13-1702, Title 13 Criminal Code, Arson).
School: A place or institution for teaching and learning; establishment for education; spec., a) an institution for teaching children (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 1200). In this instance, it means any kindergarten through 12th grade, public, private, parochial, or charter school in Maricopa County, Arizona.

School fire: A fire that is set on a school campus, on the way to or from school, on a school bus, or at a school-sponsored function.

School firesetter: A juvenile that sets a fire at school during school hours: A fire that is set on a school campus, on the way to or from school, on a school bus, or at a school sponsored function.

School firesetter referral: A referral made to a youth firesetter intervention program by a school administrator on a child who set a fire at school.

School Firesetter Referral Form: This form was designed by the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program as a way to capture information about a child who has set a fire at school. The difference between this referral form and the Youth Firesetter Referral Form is that the school form requires the signature of the child’s parent/guardian and asks specific information about the discipline the student received from the school for the fire (see Appendix A for a copy of this form).

Secondary fires: Fires that involve no casualties or rescues, attended by four or fewer appliances, are not in primary fire locations, and are not chimney fires in buildings (Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership, 2004, p. 8).

Set fire (firesetting): To make burn; ignite (Neufeldt, 1988, p. 508).
Structure: Means any building, object, vehicle, watercraft, aircraft, or place with sides and a floor, used for lodging, business, transportation, recreation, or storage (Martin, 2003, p. 77).

Youth Firesetter: See juvenile firesetter.

Youth Firesetter Intervention Program: Program offered by the Phoenix Fire Department that provides educational intervention to children ages 3 to 17 that were identified as setting a fire (Phoenix Fire Department’s Urban Services Division, 2001).

Youth Firesetter Intervention Program Parent Group: A class given to parents and guardians of youth firesetters, during the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program.

Youth firesetter referral: A referral made to a youth firesetter intervention program on a child who has set a fire other than at school.

Youth firesetter referral form: This form was designed by the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program manager as a way to capture information about a child who sets a fire (see Appendix B for a copy of this form).

Abbreviations Used

ARS: Arizona Revised Statutes
EYSIP: Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership
FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigations
FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency
FIAC: Fire Incident Analysis Child Version
FIAP: Fire Incident Analysis Parent version
FS: Fire Station
GPA: Grade Point Average
Limitations

Limitations are conditions that restrict the scope of a study, cannot be controlled by the researcher, and may affect the outcome of the study. The limitations identified in this study are listed below:

1. The student, parent, or school administrator may not be truthful about the firesetting incident.
2. Both the Fire Incident Analysis and School Administrator Interview Guide may be unintentionally biased and/or the interview questions may not obtain the appropriate information for this study.
3. Outside experiences may have an impact on how participants respond to the interview questions.
4. The audiotape recorder may malfunction during an interview, compelling the interviewer to rely on manual note taking, possibly losing parts of the interview transcript.

5. Some type of man-made or environmental disaster could occur during data collection and could affect the results of the interviews.

6. The interviewer may misunderstand or misinterpret information causing invalid conclusions to be made of interview statements.

7. In most cases, the youth firesetters that attend the YFS program are not required to attend, but rather choose to attend. Their choice to attend the YFS Program may differentiate them from youth firesetters who choose not to attend.

8. The inquiry is focused on individual school firesetters, not groups of firesetters, and a student firesetter may reveal during his/her interview that his/her fire was set in a group.

9. Every environment in which a student finds himself/herself is unique and how he/she behaves in that environment is in response to the circumstances that are occurring at that time. The unique context of a formal interview may shape the responses given by the school firesetter informant and his or her parent or guardian.

Delimitations

The delimitations of a study are the restrictions and/or boundaries the researcher imposes prior to the study’s inception. Delimitations allow the researcher to ensure that the scope of the study is manageable. Delimitations may inhibit the generalizability of the results. The delimitations of this study are outlined below:

1. This study will only include student’s aged 8 to 17 who set a school fire
between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006, in Maricopa County, Arizona.

2. Only those student firesetters whose parents or guardians consent to their child’s participation will be interviewed. Student firesetters will not be randomly sampled.

3. Only students who set fires by themselves will be interviewed. Groups of students who set a school fire will not be interviewed because information provided about the fire might become convoluted or the students might blame each other for the fire.

4. Only English-speaking students will be interviewed because the researcher is not fluent in any language other than English. If the student’s parent or guardian speaks a language other than English, a translator will be made available for the parent or guardian. This limits any generalizability of results to only English-speaking firesetters.

As a result of the delimitations, the findings of this study may or may not be generalizable to other subpopulations, locations, and/or time periods.

**Researcher Bias**

By the very nature of interpretive research, the researcher has an effect on the research effort. Therefore, it is imperative that the researcher identifies and documents her experiences regarding youth firesetting. I have spent seven years working for the Phoenix, Arizona Fire Department as the Program Manager for the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program. During that time, I have had the opportunity to interview over 4,500 youth firesetters and their family members, attend numerous youth firesetter intervention program conferences and to collaborate with youth firesetter program
personnel throughout the U.S., Canada, England, New Zealand, and Scotland. Because of these experiences, I may have certain biases about youth firesetting. To address any biases that could be cause to question the validity of this study, I participated in two bracketing interviews with two faculty members from Northern Arizona University to uncover any preconceived ideas I might hold. In Chapter 3, an in depth discussion of the bracketing interviews is explained.

Significance of the Study

School firesetting is very dangerous. Schools house hundreds if not thousands of students at any given time, all of which are at risk of being in a school fire. A fire in a school building can be as serious as a fire in an apartment building, high-rise office building, mall, or cruise-ship, each of which holds hundreds, if not thousands of people.

The intent of this study was to gain insight into the motivations of students who set school fires. Despite the dangers to school students and staff, there has been little research specific to the motivations of school firesetters. Research on juvenile firesetting has focused on the motivations of youth firesetters in general and but has not specifically addressed school firesetters. This research will break ground and set the stage for future research in the area of student-set school fires.

This study was conducted to better inform school administrators, teachers, staff, the fire service, and community members as to the issues surrounding school firesetting and to help school administrators, school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and parents better identify precursors to a school fire, in the hope that the issue can be diffused before a fire is ever started. The intent was also to encourage a dialogue and possible partnership between schools and fire departments regarding student set school
fires in order to provide assistance for potential firesetters. A school - fire department partnership would also provide the school community with important information about issues surrounding youth firesetting and access to a firesetter intervention program provided by the local fire department. Kolko (2002), found that a child who receives intervention education and counseling is less likely to continue firesetting behaviors than youth who receive no intervention.

Summary

School fires set by students have significantly increased over the past six years in Phoenix, Arizona. In 1999, the PFD’s YFS Program received 12 referrals from school administrators on student set school fires (PFD, 2006). In 2005, the PFD’s YFS Program received 99 school firesetter referrals (PFD, 2006), an 87% increase in the total number of school firesetter referrals over a six-year period. This may not seem significant if the total number of referrals received by the PFD’S YFS Program increased over the past six years; however, the total number of referrals received by the PFD’s YFS Program in 1999 was 395; in 2005 the total was 408, which shows only a 3% increase in the total number of referrals received by the PFD’s YFS Program from 1999 to 2005 (PFD, 2006).

In order to ascertain the causes of this escalating problem, 17 youth firesetters who set school fires in Phoenix area schools between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006, were interviewed.

This chapter introduced the research topic and the study’s purpose and problem statement. Included were lists of defined terms, abbreviations, limitations, and delimitations. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the study significance.
Chapter 2 reviews the historical and current literature regarding fire, pyromania, arson, juvenile firesetting, school fires, and school firesetters. Chapter 3 describes the research process used in this study. Chapter 4 reports the results of the study, and Chapter 5 details conclusions, recommendations, and implications for schools, fire departments, and mental health.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Enemy

_I am more powerful than the combined armies of the world._

_I have destroyed more men, women and children than all of the wars of all nations. I massacre thousands of people every year._

_I am more deadly than bullets, and have wrecked more homes than the mightiest guns._

_In the United States alone, I steal over 500 million dollars each year. I spare no one and I find my victims among the rich and poor alike; the young and old, the strong and weak. Widows know me to their everlasting sorrow. I loom up in such proportions that I cast my shadow over every field of labor._

_I lurk in unseen places and do most of my work silently. You are warned against me, yet you heed me not. I am relentless, merciless and cruel. I am everywhere, in the home, in the schools, in the factory, on land, in the air, and on the sea._

_I bring sickness, degradation and death, yet few seek me out to destroy me. I crush, I maim, I devastate - I will give you nothing and rob you of all you have._

_“I AM YOUR WORST ENEMY
I AM RAMPANT FIRE.”_

_(Cosgrove, 2002, p. III)_
Introduction

The March 9th, 2001 headline of *The Times-Picayune* read, “Two Boys Booked after Fire Forces School Evacuation” (Philbin, 2001). Two junior high school boys set a fire in the school bathroom during the lunch hour resulting in the evacuation of the entire school and one student being medically treated for smoke inhalation. What the article failed to reveal was the reason(s) the boys gave for setting the school fire. This and similar headlines prompted this research. Although research has identified the causes of school violence, little effort has focused specifically on school arson and even less research has identified motivations behind student-set school fires.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a succinct review of the literature surrounding school firesetting. The research on fire, pyromania, arson, juvenile firesetting, school fires and school firesetters are discussed; an explanation of each of these sections follows.

The first section is titled “Fire.” Without an understanding of the history and properties of fire, the motivations of firesetters cannot be fully explained. The second, third, and fourth sections include historical reviews of pyromania, arson, and juvenile firesetting, and describe the research available on pyromaniacs, arsonists, and firesetters dating from the 1800s through today. The fifth and final section includes a review of the current literature on school fires and school firesetters. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of the literature on juvenile firesetting.

This chapter illustrates, although while limited, that the research on juvenile firesetting has been viewed as pathological in nature. Historically, juvenile firesetters have been perceived as delinquent, in crisis or mentally ill and those situations have been
identified as the catalysts for their firesetting. In some juvenile firesetting incidents, curiosity and experimentation have been included as possible explanations, however, these reasons tend to be overshadowed by the more predominant psychological explanations for firesetting. In my experience working with juvenile firesetters I have found that the psychologically driven explanation may not always be the case.

Fire

*Early Times*

There are many divergent beliefs about how fire came to be on earth. In Greek mythology, it is said that Prometheus, the Greek Titan, was responsible for bringing civilization to the world because he stole fire from the gods and brought it to earth for the first people (Scott, 1974).

According to William (2000), Native American cultures believed that the coyote stole fire from the three Fire Beings and then gave the fire to the native peoples. According to Native American lure, when man first came to earth, he was happy in the spring, summer, and fall, but unhappy in the winter. This unhappiness stemmed from the long bitter winter months without heat, during which time the very young and very old would succumb to the elements because they were unable to handle the bitter cold weather. Coyote, overhearing the native people crying and moaning for those who had died, felt sorry for the people and wondered what he could do to help. He remembered the three Fire Beings who guarded fire. He thought the three Fire Beings were selfish in not giving the people fire for warmth, so he decided to steal some of the fire from them and bring it to the native people. Coyote, with the help of the people, successfully stole
fire from the Fire Beings and brought it to the village. The winters were never again cold or deadly for the native people.

Jeunesse (1993) stated that scientists believed that early Neanderthal man captured fire when trees and plants were set on fire by lightning or burning lava. Early man would harness the fire by bringing the lit plants to a hole built in the ground, surrounded by stones. They kept the fire burning by feeding it with wood and dried grass. This theory is further evidenced by the fact that in 1988, during an excavation in South Africa, a discovery was made of controlled fire by the hominids that dates from 1,420,000 years ago (Kolko, 2002).

So, what is this thing called fire? According to Stadolnik (2000), fire is “the chemical reaction of combustion, involving the rapid oxidation of fuel” (p. 2). Fire is a combination of three elements (heat, oxygen, and fuel) and without all three elements fire cannot be sustained.

*The Significance of Fire*

Whichever story one believes about how fire came to earth, there are three things that cannot be disputed: fire has been around since the beginning of humankind; fire is an essential element in our daily life; and fire carries an innate fascination and mysticism for most people. According to Lewis and Yarnell (1951):

To observe that without the radiation from the fire of the sun there would be no heat, no light, and no living matter in this world, is but a trite understatement of the obvious. It is also a statement of the obvious to add that the essentials of our civilization are contingent upon the utilization of fire, and that combustion, of which fire is the visible evidence, sustains life itself. Of all the elemental agents
coming within the realm of our comprehension, fire seems the closest
embodiment of the intangible force of life. In fact, if we ignore the scientific
explanation for generating it, fire may be regarded as a miraculous creation,
which emerges from inanimate matter and emits warmth, motion and color with
limitless potentialities for construction or destruction. Implicitly it may be
regarded as the visible evidence of the mystical spark of life. It is so interwoven
with every facet of human living that even as an abstract or symbolic
representation we find it has penetrated into every form of expression. (p. 1)

According to Wooden and Berkey (1984):

Fire, with its primitive appeal, still carries an innate fascination for most people.
The coloring and flickering of flames provide a visual stimulus that serves as
entertainment and a form of relaxation for the beholder. It’s crackling sound
appeals to the ear. (p. 11)

Fire in Language

Lewis and Yarnell (1951) supported their idea by explaining the significance of
fire in the evolution of language. Fire is used to signify emotional feelings or reactions
such as “the flaming passion of love to poets, the burning zeal of a reformer, the
consuming rage of anger and the tormenting flames of hell to the sinner” (p. 2). In
today’s language the words fire or heat are used to represent many different emotions or
reactions: a hotty denotes an attractive male or female; red-faced is used to show that
someone is embarrassed; being on fire describes someone who is scoring points in a
sporting event; carrying the torch is used to describe someone’s interest in another
person; fiery mad is used to show anger; firewater is a term used to describe alcohol;
someone being *too hot to handle* identifies someone who cannot be controlled; and the term *red hot lover* denotes someone who is very amorous. Terms associated with fire are also commonly used in cursing. Someone who is mad at another person may tell that person to “go to hell,” meaning that the person will suffer eternal damnation. The phrase *things are going to hell in a hand basket* may describe events that are not going as well as planned. When a child is not behaving, he or she maybe called a *hellion*. As one can see, the term *fire* or words associated with fire are used every day in every language to describe intense emotions or reactions and also to describe colors or events.

**Fire and Color**

When the word *fire* is used to describe something of color it is almost always used to describe the color red. The color red is associated with fire because of the red to red-orange flame it produces. Lewis and Yarnell (1951) stated that the color red is considered to be the first color a baby perceives, and flames and fire may be the first “object-meaning” the color red symbolizes to the infant. Schactel (1943, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951) stated:

In contrast to the cooler blue and green hues, the color red (or red merging into orange) is also considered the warmest, most stimulating and exciting in the spectrum and is capable of evoking the most primitive of emotional feelings, such as those of murder, blood, destruction, fire, or a sexual passion. (p. 1)

**Fireplace, Camp Fires, and Bonfires**

The fireplace, campfire, and bonfire are all symbols of fire that are central to the soul of humankind. In earlier times before central heating, families gathered around the
fireplace to cook, eat, stay warm, and socialize. The pioneers gathered around campfires to eat, socialize, and protect themselves. Lewis and Yarnell (1951) stated, “The early European peoples celebrated their spring and fall festivals by building spectacular bonfires often started by the sacred ‘need fire’ (generated by friction in a special ceremony)” (p. 2). Today, bonfires are ignited at high school and college football homecoming events as a traditional way to welcome current and past students to the homecoming event in a warm and friendly manner.

*Religion and Fire*

Fire has been associated with religions and religious ceremonies around the world. The Christian Bible includes numerous references to fire. In the book of Hebrew, chapter 12, verses 27-29, reference is made to the fact that God is a consuming fire:

> And this word, yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shake, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom, which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire. (Revised Standard Version)

In Judaism, the Ner Tamid, the Eternal Light (God’s Light) hangs above the ark and burns continually in the front of the synagogue. The Ner Tamid symbolizes the shining light of the Torah that tells people of God’s presence in their lives (Ner Tamid, 2006). According to the Qur'an, God created two apparently parallel species, man (Adam) and Jinn. Man was created from sounding clay of altered black mud and Jinn were created from the smokeless flame of fire. The Jinn were endowed with reason, responsibility, and disobedience and are more prone to evil than man (Jinn According to
Qur’an and Sunnah, n.d). In Hinduism, saffron, the color of fire (Agni), symbolizes the Supreme Being. Agni, in Hindu mythology, is a Vedic god who is the spark of life.

Naylor (1997) stated:

Agni is everyone’s hearth; he is the vital spark of life, and so a part of him is in all living things; he is the fire, which consumes food in peoples’ stomachs, as well as the fire, which consumes the offerings to the gods. He is the fire of the sun, in the lighting bolt, and in the smoke column, which holds up the heavens. The stars are sparks from his flame (p.1).

“Agni was so important to the ancient Indians that 200 hymns in the Rig Veda are addressed to him, and eight of its ten books begin with praises dedicated to him” (Naylor, 1997, p. 1).

Fire and Ceremonies

Fire also plays a part in many religious and nonreligious ceremonies. During wedding ceremonies, the couple lights one candle to symbolize that the two are becoming one. In Native American cultures, sweat lodge ceremonies are used to cleanse mental stresses, emotions, and toxins and heal infirmities. Lakota elder Black Elk tells us, "The sweat lodge utilizes all powers of the universe: earth, and things that grow from the earth; water; fire; and air" (Hopkins, 2006). Also, according to Hopkins:

The sweat lodge symbolizes the womb of Grandmother Earth and the heated stones represent her body, which supports all life. The fire that is used to heat the rocks represents the perpetual light of the world, and is the source of all life and power. The water slowly releases the heat in the stones, which rises as steam and permeates the air to create a hot, humid atmosphere conducive to manifestation of
the particular intent of the ceremony (p. 2).

It is customary in the United States and many other countries to place lit candles on a birthday cake to celebrate and symbolize the number of years a person has been alive. In the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, a menorah is lit to commemorate the rededication of the Holy Temple after the Jewish people claimed victory over the Hellenist Syrians, the Greek King of Syria and the Antiochs (The History Channel, 1996-2006, p. 2).

Fire, Entertainment and Sports

References to fire are found in all forms of entertainment. An example of this is in the music industry is when certain songs have the word *fire* in their titles such as, *Fire Down Below, Light my Fire, Fire Lake, Love Fire, Fire and Ice,* and *Walking on Fire.* Many movies have been made about fire and include: *Ladder 49, Backdraft, Quest for Fire, Chariot’s of Fire, St. Elmo’s Fire,* and the *Towering Inferno.* Every 4th of July, millions of Americans watch fireworks as part of a national celebration. The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus have fire-eaters, fire-breathers and rings of fire in their circus acts. Theatrical productions with fire in the title include, *Fire Mountain, The Mill Fire, Playing with Fire,* and most recently, *Ring of Fire.* It is also significant that in both the winter and summer Olympics the Olympic flame, the link between the ancient Games in Greece and the modern Games, represents peace, friendship, purity, and the pursuit of perfection.

Every Day Uses of Fire

Human beings use fire every day for many different purposes. Everyday uses of fire include: for cooking, for heat and light, in medicine, transportation, industry, celebrations, religious and nonreligious ceremonies, smoking, and as a weapon.
However, people also use fire for criminal purposes, to threaten and intimidate others, as weapons, for sexual excitement, for fun, to alleviate boredom, to seek revenge, to damage property, and to destroy evidence. When individuals use fire for the wrong reasons, in the eyes of mental health, the fire service and law enforcement, they fall into one of three categories: (a) pyromaniacs, (b) arsonists, or (c) juvenile arsonists or firesetters. The next section of chapter 2 looks in depth at each of these fire-related categories.

Pyromania

*Pyromania in the 1800s*

After the French Revolution, Pinel, was credited with, and focused public attention on, the mistreatment of those citizens termed *insane* and began a program for the “classification and treatment of the insane” (Lewis & Yarnell, 1951, p. 9). Pinel described a type of insanity where judgment is affected but the individual’s intelligence remains intact. Esquirol, a student of Pinel, termed the concept *monomania* and considered monomanie to be “a partial lesion of intelligence, emotions, or will, limited to a single object” (Lewis & Yarnell, 1951, p. 9). Esquirol then defined the term *instinctive monomania* as “an expression of involuntary irresistible impulses” (Esquirol, 1845, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). According to Esquirol, people who set fires suffer irresistible impulses to light fires and should be identified as *insane*. The term *pyromania* was first introduced by the Frenchman, Marc, in 1833 who used the term *monomanie incendiari* to classify firesetters as pyromaniacs (Marc, 1833, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

While the French were developing the classification system and treatment of the insane, the German psychiatrist Platner introduced the term *amentia occulta*, to describe a condition in which the intelligence of the patient remains the same but the patient’s
conduct and feelings become disordered. He used the term *feuerlust* to identify firesetters in this category (Platner, 1797, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). In 1820, Meckel developed the term *brandstiftungstrieb* (impulsive incendiarism) to describe a distinct mental disorder associated with firesetting (Meckel, 1820, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

In 1820, with the new classification of pyromania, a problem occurred, anyone who set a fire and was classified as a pyromaniac would be considered insane and therefore not be held culpable or responsible for the fire by the court of law.

Casper, one of the antagonists of the time, believed that very few people who set fires did so without a motive. In 1846 he wrote:

A will-of-the-wisp is so called pyromania. It is a superstition and should be taken out of legal psychiatry. If firesetting is present in an individual, there is a normal need to make the personality felt. Those without a motive do so because of vanity and obstinacy (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951, p. 10).

Casper (1946) also believed that all cases of firesetting regardless of motive or lack thereof should be considered criminal (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). Flemming (1830), another antagonist of the time, argued that firesetting “resulted from such normal motives as hatred and revenge or that it was merely the accidental outcome of a morbid condition in which case insanity would not be questioned” (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951, p. 256).

Legrand du Saulle (1856) defined pyromania as “a disorder in the development of the passions without a depression in intelligence.” Legrand du Saulle subdivided pyromania into three categories; “(1) accidental pyromania, illustrated by the
irresponsible and feebleminded: (2) incomplete pyromania, those suffering from
nostalgia; (3) complete pyromania, manifesting the irresistible impulse without
depression or excitation of the intellectual faculties” (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951,
p. 10). Marandon de Montyl (1885) offered his own classifications of firesetting:

(1) the unconscious act of the idiot or dement; (2) the thoughtless act of the
maniac; (3) the passive act of one hallucinated; (4) an act of logic with
systematized delusions; (5) the perverse act of moral insanity; (6) the exuberant
act of an emotional person; none of these he judged was suffering from
pyromania. (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951, p. 10).

Marandon de Montyl also believed that pyromania was a symptom of degenerates.

Pilgrim (1884-1885) spoke about the pyromania problem in the United States,
“There is no such psychological entity as pyromania and an incendiary act is either the
crime of arson or the symptom of a diseased or ill-developed brain” (cited by Lewis &
Yarnell, 1951, p. 11).

During the 1800s and early 1900s, the majority of the literature on pyromania
dealt with the system of classification and legalities associated with firesetting and
insanity. However, a number of psychiatrists also wrote abstracts regarding the
psychopathology of firesetting.

For example, Osiander (1813) explained firesetting as caused by a disturbance in
the brain having to do with puberty. The arterial blood in the brains of children going
through puberty drains to the genitals and the venous blood goes to the brain. The eyes
are then deprived of the arterial blood that has drained to the genitals and the eyes
become irritable. The adolescent is in need of light and is compelled to make a fire (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Bischoff (1853), a second psychiatrist, wrote that women who were sexually stimulated with no outlet for this stimulation would set fires purely out of jealousy. He also stated that children under five years of age may set fires to be mischievous.

Meschede (1873) proposed that there was a true organic pathology in the firesetter. He stated that people suffering from paralytic may have visions of fire. He believed that during menses, hysterical girls dreamed of fire (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Rather than attributing firesetting to age or gender, Friederich (1863) proposed that pyroptothymia was the love of staring or looking at a fire as an explanation for firesetting. He doubted the existence of true pyromania (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

On the other hand, Arndt (1877) believed that the power to destroy overpowered the firesetter causing him/her to set a fire (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Pyromania in the 1900s

By the turn of the century, the explanations for pyromania became more sophisticated and more focus was placed on brain research to explain the causes of firesetting. The causes of firesetting were in fact believed to be wide ranging and the following section illustrates the vast range of explanations for firesetting.

According to Nacke (1906), the rhythmic movement of the flames caused excitement and that phototropism (attraction to the glare of the fire) made disturbances in the circulation of the brain (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). Reiss (1909) introduced the idea that the firesetter might not have any intellectual or affective problems, but that
he or she has a different type of mind. He believed that firesetters are withdrawn, appear incompetent, and are dangerous. The firesetter is unable to release his or her stresses and the tensions are released in dangerous ways (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Hellwig (1910) and Wulffen (1910) found fire mania and pyromania present in children. Wulffen believed that the pyromania was a result of a sadistic motive and that erotic symbols were the result of an attraction to warmth and light. Whereas, Hellwig argued that young girls lusted after sparkling things, illumination, and fire (Hellwig, [1910] & Wulffen, [1910], cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Monkemoller (1912, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951) completed and published a comprehensive review of the literature on pyromania in the 19th century along with 240 case histories and concluded:

1. There is no psychic, no one entity which can be considered typical for firesetting—even in cases on similar psychic illness, different motivation occurs; 2. there is no special drive to set fires and no special type of person, not even a typical group of criminals; 3. that the offender is usually youthful and a girl [not proven by research], . . . and the firesetting can happen at any important developmental period; 4. firesetting is the least frequent of crimes, with the female percentage low; 5. only 13% of his cases admitted a love of fire, but rather appeared to be more fearful of fire; 6. he [Monkemoller] believed that all who set fires were abnormal, even though plausible motives, such as obtaining insurance, were presented. (p. 20)

Byloff (1914) believed that all people love fire. He went on to say that in every person there is some instinct toward destruction. He felt that the real firesetter hungered
for the excitement of a fire and through this would get rid of unendurable psychic sensation (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951). In contrast, Bychowski (1919) believed that there was a connection between schizophrenia and firesetting. He found that in all firesetters he worked with there was a discrepancy between the firesetter’s real and psychic imagination (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Stekel (1924), like Monkenmoller mentioned above, wrote a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding pyromania. Stekel found that firesetters give puerile reasons for their firesetting incidents. He also suggested that child firesetters are more likely to play with fire or play the fireman game because they become so much more absorbed with fire and water than adults. He related that child firesetters look at fire as a destructive tool, allowing them power over adults. Stekel explained two different types of child firesetters: the ones that maintain an interest in fire and everything represented by fire over many years, and those who set a fire after some type of crisis. The child who shows interest in fire over time is considered by Stekel to be very dangerous. Those children who set a fire after a crisis usually abandon their firesetting after a short period of time (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).

Finscher (1932) wrote about his belief that criminals were the individuals who set most fires. The motives behind these fires were revenge, suicide, and to cover up a theft (cited by Lewis and Yarnell, 1951). Többen (1934), on the other hand, found a relationship between alcohol intoxication and firesetting. He believed that when an individual was not under the influence of alcohol, he or she was able to control his or her impulses to set fires. However, when a person was intoxicated and his or her inhibitions were down, his or her longing to set a fire was released (cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951).
As implied by the long list of explanations reported above, the term *pyromania* was identified in the 1800s and used to identify those individuals who set fires with or without mental illness. Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, many researchers, psychiatrists, and physicians wrote about pyromania and firesetting from their theoretical perspectives. Today, the term *pyromania* is used infrequently and when it is used, it is used to describe someone with a mental illness specifically related to firesetting.

*Pyromania* is defined as, “A pattern of deliberate setting of fires for pleasure or satisfaction derived from the relief of tension experienced before the fire-setting” (Gale, 2006). *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) gives the following diagnostic criteria for pyromania:

1. Deliberate and purposeful fire setting on more than one occasion.
2. Tension or affective arousal before the act.
3. Fascination with, interest in, curiosity about, or attraction to fire and its situational context.
4. Pleasure, gratification, or relief when setting fires, or when witnessing or participating in their aftermath.
5. The fire setting is not done for monetary gain, as an expression of sociopolitical ideology, to conceal criminal activity, to express anger or vengeance, to improve one’s living circumstances, is a response to a delusion or a hallucination, or the result of impaired judgment.
6. The fire setting is not better accounted for by Conduct Disorder, a Manic Episode, or Antisocial Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2004).
Today, “Pyromania is the diagnosis least frequently used for firesetters, as they are more likely to be viewed by mental health practitioners as suffering from either a conduct disorder, an antisocial personality disorder, schizophrenia, or an organic mental disorder” (Wooden & Berkey, 1984, p.14).

*Arson* and *firesetting* are the terms used most frequently today to describe both adults and children who set fires. The next section discusses arson and the motives of arsonists.

**Arson**


- Arson is the leading cause of fire in the United States (U.S.). Each year, an estimated 267,000 fires are attributed to arson, which result in $1.4 billion in property loss and cause over 2,000 injuries and 475 deaths. As a result, arson prevention and investigation have become the focus of increased attention within the federal government, the fire service and the criminal justice system. (USFA, 2005).

The Uniform Crime Reporting Program (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2002) defines arson as:

- Any will-full or malicious burning or attempt to burn, with or without intent to defraud, a dwelling house, public building, motor vehicle or aircraft, personal property of another, etc. Only fires determined through investigation to have been willfully or maliciously set are classified as arson. (p. 1).
However, in the United States, how the crime of arson is defined, enforced and punished is up to each individual state as long as the crime does not fall into federal jurisdiction. In Arizona, the crime of arson is broken down into three categories: (a) reckless burning, (b) arson of a structure or property, and (c) arson of an occupied structure (Martin, 2003, p. 77):

13-1702. Reckless Burning: A person commits reckless burning by recklessly causing a fire or explosion which results in damage to an occupied structure, a structure, wildland or property. Class 1 misdemeanor

13-1703. Arson of a Structure or Property: A person commits arson of a structure or property by knowingly and unlawfully damaging a structure or property by knowingly causing a fire or explosion. Class 4 felony

13-1704. Arson of an Occupied Structure: A person commits arson of an occupied structure by knowingly and unlawfully damaging an occupied structure by causing a fire or explosion. Class 2 felony

In Arizona a child as young as eight years of age can be arrested for committing the crime of arson, even if he or she did not mean for the fire to damage anything, hurt anyone, or get out of control. Intent to cause harm or destruction is not part of the arson statutes in the state of Arizona.

The Elements of Arson

When a fire occurs it is the responsibility of the fire investigator to determine the cause of the fire. The fire investigator looks for three elements to determine if the fire should be considered the crime of arson. DeHaan (2002) identified these as follows:

1. There has been a burning of property. This must be shown to the court to be
actual destruction, at least in part, not just scorching or sooting (although some states include any physical or visible impairment of any surface).

2. The burning is incendiary in origin. Proof of the existence of an effective incendiary device, no matter how simple it may be, is adequate. Proof must be accomplished by showing specifically how all-possible natural or accidental causes have been considered and ruled out.

3. The burning is shown to be started with malice, that is with intent of destroying property (p. 508).

The Early Years of Arson Motives

According to Wooden and Berkey (1984), “Arson itself is as old as civilization, but it was not until the nineteenth century that there appeared to be much concern about the motivations for it or about the psychological stability of arsonists” (p. 12). As already reported, in the 1800s and early 1900s, considerable emphasis was placed on arsonists suffering from pyromania. Freud (1932) wrote one of the most influential articles on firesetting, The Acquisition of Power Over Fire, and presented his theory on man’s fascination with fire as follows:

Now I conjectured that in order to possess himself of fire it was necessary for man to renounce his homosexuality tinged desire to extinguish it with a stream of urine. I think that this conjecture can be confirmed by the interpretation of the Greek myth of Prometheus, provided we bear in mind the distortions to be expected in the transition from fact to the content of a myth (p. 406).

Kaufman, Heins, and Reiser (1961) supported Freud’s theory of the Phallic Stage of Psychosocial development by hypothesizing that setting fires can be either a substitute for
a person’s forbidden masturbatory desires, or that the fire itself causes the individual to become sexually aroused. Informed by Freud’s expose, the focus of theoretical rhetoric on arson through the 1960’s was that arson was motivated by some type of sexual deviance. It was not until the mid-1960s that research on the motives of arsonists moved away from theories of sexual deviance. In 1966, McKerracher and Dacre studied 30 adult male arsonists in a forensic psychiatric setting. They found that when compared with 147 adult non-arson offenders, the motives for the arsons were related to feelings of aggression, rather than from sexual deviance. In support of McKerracher and Dacre’s findings, Wolford (1972) reported that arsonists were unable to express their anger to others. Vreeland and Waller (1979) supported Wolford’s findings when they found that arsonists could not confront the object(s) of their anger or aggression, and instead the arsonists displaced that anger or aggression against property by starting fires.

In addition to the literature that focuses on pyromania, more current discussions of arson revolve around criminality. The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) has identified six major categories of arson motives:

1. Profit
2. Vandalism
3. Excitement
4. Revenge
5. Crime concealment

According to DeHaan (2002), of these six categories, the vandalism category is most closely associated with juvenile and adolescent firesetting. DeHaan stated that juvenile
fires “are set when the opportunity arises, often after school or work or on weekends. Boredom and frustration among youths, sometimes lead to peer-group challenge to create some excitement” (p. 511).

O’Connor (1987) identified nine categories of arson motives; (a) arson for profit, which would include insurance fraud and welfare fraud; (b) business-related fraud, which includes eliminating the competition and organized crime; (c) demolition and rehabilitation scams and building strippers; (d) revenge and prejudice fires; (e) vanity or hero fires; (f) crime concealment fires; (g) mass civil disturbances; (h) terrorism; and (i) juvenile firesetters and vandalism. Yet in focusing solely on juveniles, O’Connor stated, “A motive for juvenile firesetters is not always apparent” (p. 20), like it is with an adult. In support of O’Connor, Boudreau et al. (1977) stated:

Vandalism is a common cause ascribed to fires set by juveniles who seem to burn property merely to relieve boredom or as a general protest against authority.

Many school fires as well as fires in abandoned autos, vacant buildings, and trash receptacles are believed to be caused by this type of arsonist (p. 19).

In other words, according to Boudreau et al. (1977), O’Connor (1987), and DeHaan (2002), unlike arson in general, the motive is not always apparent as to juvenile firesetting and it could be just a symptom of boredom.

Juvenile Firesetting

In reviewing the literature that looks specifically at juvenile firesetting, four theoretical frameworks are evident; (a) Psychoanalytic Theory, (b) Social Learning Theory, (c) Dynamic-Behavioral Theory, and (d) Cycles of Firesetting Oregon Model. Each theory outlines the etiology for juvenile firesetting behavior based on the theoretical
perspective of the researchers. Three of the four are informed by a mental health perspective and have provided the foundation for the explanations of the motivations of firesetters to date.

**Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychoanalytic Theory is a theory of human development that interprets human development in terms of motives and drives. Those that prescribe to Psychoanalytic Theory believe that human development is “primarily unconscious and heavily colored by emotion. Behavior is merely a surface characteristic, and it is important to analyze the symbolic meanings of behavior, and that early experiences are important to human development” (Santrock, 2001 p. 31). Freud, the father of Psychoanalytic Theory, described five stages of human development that he termed the stages of psychosocial development. These five stages include; the oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital stages of human development. The third stage, the phallic stage, comes from the Latin word *phallus*, which in English means penis. According to Freud the phallic stage of development occurs between three and six years of age. During the phallic stage, the child’s pleasure focuses on his genitals.

Freud believed that a relationship exists between fire and sexual drives and desires, and that firesetting was an expression of the phallic-urethral drive. He said that when males would attempt to extinguish flames with their own urine it symbolized man’s homosexual struggle with another phallus (the movement of the flames signifying another phallus) (Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987, p. 44). He went on to surmise that sexual feelings were associated with urination as a primary motive associated with the thrill of igniting and then extinguishing a fire (Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987, p. 44). Some Freidians
even believed that there was a symbiotic relationship between a male’s penis and urination and a firefighter’s fire-hose that spouted water. In support of Freud’s analysis, other psychoanalytic theorists believed that when a male would set a fire, it was a regression to the phallic stage of psychosocial development and substituted for forbidden masturbatory desires (Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987, p. 44).

**Social Learning Theory**

Bandura and Walters (1963) first introduced Social Learning Theory as an extension of Miller and Dollard’s (1941) research on the behavioral interpretation of modeling. Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory looks at the importance of learning through observation and modeling of behaviors, reactions, and attitudes of others. Bandura (1977) stated:

> Learning would be exceeding laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (p. 22).

Bandura (1973) believed that anger and aggression, just like other types of behaviors, were learned through observational learning. An individual’s observational learning comes from his or her family, cultural background, peer group, community, and mass media. According to Gaynor and Hatcher (1987):

> Aggressive children come from families where one or more members also demonstrate aggressive behaviors. Through modeling, children learn to exhibit aggressive behaviors. As a result, poor social skills begin to develop within the
family and continue to occur outside the family, for example, with peers and in school. Hence the family as well as the youngster’s other primary environments reinforces the development of the socially deviant behavior of firesetting. (pp. 46-47)

The link between Social Learning Theory and juvenile firesetting would come from a child seeing a family member or peer set a fire out of anger or aggression.

Current firesetter researchers Kolko and Kazdin (1986), drew on Social Learning Theory to develop a risk-factor model for juvenile firesetters. This model includes three domains; (a) learning experiences and cues, (b) personal repertoire, and (c) parent and family influences and stressors. Learning experiences and cues would include the child’s early modeling and vicarious experiences, early interest and direct experiences, and the availability of adult models and incendiary materials. The personal repertoire would include cognitive components such as limited fire and fire safety awareness, behavioral components such as interpersonal ineffectiveness/skill deficits and antisocial behavior excesses, and motivational components. The parent and family influences and stressors would include limited supervision and monitoring, parental distance and uninvolvement, parental pathology and limitations, and stressful external events.

Dynamic-Behavioral Theory

Dr. Ken Fineman (1980) introduced the Dynamic-Behavioral Theory of firesetting in 1980, as a way to show that certain factors predispose a child to firesetting. These factors include; (a) personality characteristics, (b) family and social situations, and (c) environmental conditions (see Table 1 for a description of these factors).
**Table 1**

*Dynamic-Behavioral Theory of Firesetting (Fineman, 1980)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality characteristics</td>
<td>Child’s exhibited behaviors, school adjustment, physical problems, and organic dysfunctions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and social situations</td>
<td>Information about the family system, how the child gets along with family members, how discipline is meted out, and if there is an ongoing crisis within the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental conditions</td>
<td>The child receives encouragement to play with fire, models firesetting behavior identified in others, and deals with emotional distress, peer pressure, and stress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fineman (1995) introduced his *Juvenile Firesetter Child and Family Risk Survey* as a way to determine the future risk of firesetting of a child already determined to be a firesetter.

**Cycles of Firesetting**

Based upon years of experience working with juvenile firesetters, the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s Office and the Oregon Treatment Strategies Task Force partnered to develop the Cycles Model of Firesetting. According to Stadolnik (2000), “The Cycles Model is visually represented by four concentric circles that represent the four dimensions of a juvenile’s internal and external world that are considered to be related to their likelihood of firesetting” (p. 19). The cycle includes four circles; (a) the emotional/cognitive cycle, (b) the behavior cycle, (c) the family/household cycle, and (d) the community/social cycle. The four circles are described in Table 2.
Table 2

*Cycles Model of Firesetting* (Stadolnik, 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/cognitive</td>
<td>Juvenile’s thoughts and feelings after his or her firesetting event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Behaviors of the juvenile firesetter that coincide with his or her thoughts and feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family household</td>
<td>How the family responds to the firesetting event and the emotional environment of the juvenile’s household.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/social</td>
<td>Responses by the community to the firesetting and what level of support or restriction the firesetter and family receive.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A vast number of empirical studies have been informed by these four theoretical frameworks of youth firesetting. The following section discusses this research timeline, beginning with the research of Dr. Helen Yarnell in the 1930s, through the current firesetter research of today. The chronology illustrates a move from studying institutionalized juvenile firesetters to the development of a series of typologies for non-institutionalized juvenile firesetters.

1930–1960

During 1937 and 1938, Dr. Helen Yarnell, working in the Psychiatric Division of Bellevue Hospital, undertook one of the very first studies on the phenomenon of juvenile firesetting. The reason for the study stemmed from her discovery that children who were referred to the Psychiatric Division of Bellevue Hospital for observation and firesetting tendencies showed a variation in their clinical firesetting background. Yarnell’s study
team observed 60 children between the ages of 6 and 15. Sixty percent were between the ages of 6 and 8 and 35% were between the ages of 11 and 15. Only two were girls, ages 6 and 7. The research team reviewed the children’s clinical history and completed interviews with each child. According to Yarnell (1940), the adolescent group’s findings were much different than that of the younger group; however, Yarnell’s study with the adolescent group was incomplete at the time of the printing of her monograph.

In the first column of Table 3 is a list of the findings on the children ages 6 through 8, with the exception of five children who were deemed to be mentally defective. In the second column of Table 3 is a list of the findings on the adolescents, ages 11 through 15. Yarnell found that children aged 6-8, started fires because of a deprivation of love and security at home, whereas older children viewed fire as exciting and entertaining.
Table 3

*Findings of Dr. Helen Yarnell’s 1937-1938 Study (Yarnell, 1940, pp. 272-286)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ages 6 through 8</th>
<th>Ages 11 through 15</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> All of the children are of average to dull normal intelligence, but many had some special educational disability such as reading or arithmetic. This made their school adjustment difficult.</td>
<td><strong>1.</strong> This group showed little anxiety or regret for their firesetting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong> In every case, the child had been deprived of love and security in his/her home life.</td>
<td><strong>2.</strong> Anxiety dreams were infrequent.</td>
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<td><strong>3.</strong> They set fires only when under stress in their home situation.</td>
<td><strong>3.</strong> The fires were planned, set away from home, and many caused losses involving thousands of dollars.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> The children set fires, with associated fantasies to burn some member of the family who had either withheld love from the child or become too serious a rival for the love of a parent.</td>
<td><strong>4.</strong> The adolescents waited to see the fires and enjoyed the noise and excitement from the fire engines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> The fires are set in and around the home, cause little damage, and are usually put out by the child himself; significance is chiefly symbolic.</td>
<td><strong>5.</strong> The boys tended to go in pairs, with the exclusion of all other friends. The pairs included an aggressive and passive member, suggesting homosexual association; however, the researchers never proved this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong> The children show other types of asocial behavior such as running away from home, truancy, stealing, and general hyper kinesis and aggression.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong> All children show acute anxiety and suffer from terrifying dreams and fantasies, including vivid attacks by the devil, ghosts, and skeletons.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8.</strong> All children have some sexual conflicts and many tell of active masturbation, sodomy, or fellatio; type of activity does not seem significant.</td>
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<td><strong>9.</strong> Enuresis was noted in only nine of the cases and seemed a part of the general picture rather than specifically associated with the fire motif.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10.</strong> A special group of children were orphans who had been placed in boarding homes but failed to make emotional adjustments.</td>
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In a second study begun shortly after Yarnell’s study of 1937-1938, Drs. Nolan Lewis and Helen Yarnell (1951) looked at a group of 238 child firesetters between the ages of 5 and 15. In this study the case records were obtained from fire reports, insurance investigators, juvenile research centers, and juvenile courts. The 1951 study included the 30 cases from Yarnell’s previous 1937-1938 research study. In this study Lewis and Yarnell reported a wide range of motivations for firesetting that included:

1. With the exception of children who set fires against the school, the children’s intelligence ranged from low average to superior.

2. Most of the fires occurred when the child was found to feel guilty over some type of sexual preoccupation.

3. A number of the fires were symbolic and directed specifically toward one member of the family.

4. Thirty-two percent of the firesetters set the fire because they liked fire and excitement.

5. Twenty-two percent of the firesetters set the fire as revenge against a parent or foster home.

6. Seventeen percent of the firesetters set the fire because they liked to see the fire engines.

7. Fifteen percent of the firesetters set the fire out of revenge against their employer.
8. Eight percent of the firesetters set the fire to be a hero.

9. Six percent of the firesetters set the fire to cover or be associated with stealing.

Both the Yarnell (1940) and the Lewis and Yarnell (1951) studies were the first studies that looked specifically at the child and adolescent firesetter. These studies were the groundwork for future research on child and adolescent firesetting. Unfortunately, it was not until the 1970s, when research on juvenile firesetting resumed because fire departments and mental health professionals began to notice an increase in the numbers of reported child and adolescent firesetting incidents.

1960–1980

There was little research, aside from that of Lewis and Yarnell, throughout the 1940s and 1950s. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the fire service and mental health took notice of the large number of reported youth who were setting fires, that were appearing in the fire service statistics of that time.

Macht and Mack (1968) began the resurgence in firesetting research in 1968. They studied four adolescent firesetters ages 16 to 18. In this study they found that all four boys came from stressful home situations. The boys only set fires when they were away from their fathers, and each one of the boy’s fathers had some type of significant job involvement with fire. Macht and Mack concluded that:

Fire had come to have a special and pleasurable meaning in the lives of these patients. . . . In an important sense the firesetting represents a call from the overburdened adolescent to the absent father in order to bring him to the rescue. . .
The activity in connection with fire served to reestablish a lost relationship with the father (p. 286).

Folkman and Siegelman (1971) undertook a pilot study to explore the firesetting behavior in 47 randomly selected normal children ages 6 and 7. In this study, Folkman and Siegelman found that only two boys had come to the attention of the fire service for setting fires. However, 60% of the boys and 33% of the girls were found to have an interest in fire, which was exhibited by either a self-report of previous firesetting or reporting they had asked to light matches. During this time the focus expanded to identifying treatment options for juvenile firesetters.

During a California State Psychological Association conference in 1975, a group of fire service personnel and psychologists met to discuss the issue of juvenile firesetting. The reason for this discussion was the fact that both fire service and mental health had been receiving referrals on juvenile firesetters and neither group knew how to help these children. Out of this meeting the Fire Service and Arson Prevention Committee was formed to design methods to work with the child firesetters. According to Gaynor and Hatcher (1987), this committee received a grant from the United States Fire Administration to begin work on designing and developing a method to classify juvenile firesetting behavior and to determine the risk of future firesetting in children who have been identified as firesetters. This committee’s work provided the basis for the evaluation and classification system used today with youth firesetters.

In 1976, Bernard Levin wrote about the psychological characteristics of firesetters. The main focus of this article was on the adult firesetter; however, he did discuss children and fire by stating:
Most people are fascinated by fire. This fascination starts at an early age and manifests itself in young children playing with matches. While people may not outgrow their basic fascination with fire, normal children learn that playing with matches is not acceptable behavior and discontinue it by the age of five or six. A few children continue to play with matches or deliberately set destructive fires, and their chronic firesetting is an observable symptom of a psychological disturbance (p. 38).

He went on to discuss two types of treatments used when working with chronic juvenile firesetters. The first treatment discussed by Welsh (1971) was stimulus satiation. This technique requires a firesetter to strike matches for an hour a day until the firesetter is sick of lighting the matches and stops match lighting and/or firesetting. The second treatment discussed was positive reinforcement that is accompanied with the threat of punishment by loss (Holland, 1969). This technique requires a child to bring any found match packages to his father, who would then give him a reward for his positive behavior. This treatment would cause the child to develop positive nonfiresetting behaviors based on the positive reward.

The literature on juvenile firesetting from the 1940s through the 1970s focused both on the diagnosis and treatment of firesetting behaviors. During this time, Heath, Gayton, and Hardesty (1976) reviewed the literature on juvenile firesetting and found only six journal articles that exclusively discussed juvenile firesetting and 17 articles on issues related to juvenile firesetting. Unfortunately, they were unable to get their literature review article published in the United States, so they relied upon the Canadian Psychiatric Association to publish the literature review in their journal.
However, from the 1980s through today, the literature has proven to be ripe with research on juvenile firesetting, just not specific to the motivations of school firesetters or the phenomenon of school fires.

1980–Today

From the 1980s through today, there have been many different foci of youth firesetter research, including: (a) the impact of the environment on the juvenile firesetter’s behavior (Fineman, 1980; Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Vreeland & Waller, 1979); (b) psychiatric disorders as the catalyst for juvenile firesetting (Fineman, 1980; Freud, 1932; Heath et al., 1976; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986; Kuhnley, Henderson, & Quinland, 1982; Lewis & Yarnell, 1951; Williams, 2005; Wooden & Berkey, 1984; Yarnell, 1940). (c) firesetting as a learned behavior (Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986; Vreeland & Waller, 1979); (d) juvenile firesetter assessment and evaluation instruments (Fineman 1980, 1995; Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Sakheim & Osborn, 1994; Slavkin, 2000; Stadolnik, 2000); (e) mental health and educational interventions (Bumpass, Fagelman, & Brix, 1983; Fineman, 1980, 1995; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986, 1991; Sakheim & Osborn, 1994; Stadolnik, 2000; Wooden & Berkey, 1984), and (f) juvenile firesetter motives and typologies (Cotterall, 1999; Fineman, 1980; Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Hall, 2006; Kolko & Kazdin, 1991; Meade, 1998; Sakheim & Osborn, 1994; Swaffer & Hollin, 1995; Terjestam & Ryden, 1996). Because the specific focus of this dissertation is on the self-reported motivations of students who set school fires, the following section focuses strictly on the literature regarding firesetter motives and typologies. While the typologies contain anywhere from three to nine categories of firesetter motives, they all range from the curious to pathological firesetter.
Firesetter Motives and Typologies

Over the past 25 years a range of researchers have developed their own typologies to categorize the motives of juvenile firesetters. Interestingly, the typologies of the US-based researchers have similar types of categories. Table 4 gives an illustration of the typologies identified by various US researchers and an explanation of each of the typologies follows in Table 5.
Table 4

*Typologies of Juvenile Firesetters Identified by US Researchers*

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<tr>
<td><strong>Curious</strong></td>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>Play w/ matches</td>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Troubled</strong></td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cry for help</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Cry for help</td>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would be hero</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attention seeking</td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual pleasure</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual excitement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>booking</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pathological</strong></td>
<td>Severeely disturbed</td>
<td>Severeely disturbed</td>
<td>Severeely disturbed</td>
<td>Pathological</td>
<td>Pathological</td>
<td>Pathological</td>
<td>Pathological</td>
<td>Thought disordered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitively impaired</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disordered coping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sociocultural</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

*Firesetter Typology Definitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Accidental</td>
<td>These children are normally under age 11 and are experimenting or playing scientist and accidentally start a fire (Fineman, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Attention-seeking</td>
<td>These children set fires to receive attention from others whether it is positive attention or negative attention (Sakheim &amp; Osborn, 1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cognitively Impaired</td>
<td>These children and adolescents have a diagnosis Of either Attention deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, learning disabilities, are mildly mentally retarded, have an organic brain dysfunction, suffer from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or are drug addicted babies. Like the severely disturbed firesetter, these you may set fires because of their impairment (Fineman, 1995).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Crisis These children use fire either consciously or subconsciously to communicate their distress or in an effort to seek relief from their distress (Stadolnik, 2002).

5. Cry-for-help These children set fires to gain attention for some stress in their life (Kolko, 1999).

6. Curiosity/Experimental These children set fires simply out of curiosity or experimentation as they learn about their worlds (Williams, 2005).

7. Delinquent These youth are more apt to set fires in peer groups, set off fireworks, and set off false fire alarms. These fires are mainly set because of peer pressure, boredom, or to show off. They also can be set to conceal a crime (Hall and Brakhage, 1997; Kolko, 1999).

8. Disordered Coping This firesetter sets fires in order to return to a state of emotional equilibrium after experiencing either intense anxiety, rage or both (Williams, 2005).

9. Pathological This group of children who set fires includes those who are psychotic, paranoid or delusional, or live in chronically disturbed or bizarre environments (Stadolnik, 2002).
10. Play-with-matches These children find matches and begin to play with them (Wooden & Berkey, 1984).

11. Revenge This firesetter sets fires as an act of retaliation against another individual or entity for some real or imagined wrong (Williams, 2005).

12. Severely disturbed These children have a paranoid, psychotic fixation on fire. They are sensory reinforcement controlled - the sensory aspect of the fire is sufficiently reinforcing for them to set fires frequently (Slavkin, 2000).

13. Sexual excitement/pleasure This firesetter feels pleasurable or sexual excitement when lighting or watching a fire (Sakheim & Osborn, 1994).

14. Socio-cultural type These children set fires to get approval for doing something antisocial or as part of a civil unrest (Slavkin, 2000).

15. Strategic These youth set fires to damage or destroy property, for revenge reasons, and/or to harm others (Hall & Brakhage, 1997).

16. Thought disordered This firesetter suffers from some type of thought disorder such as schizophrenia, and attributes their firesetting to hallucinations or delusion (Williams, 2005).
17. Thrill-seeking  
This firesetter sets fires as a way to experience danger or a sensation of risk (Williams, 2005).

18. Troubled  
This firesetter has some type of ongoing trouble or crisis in his or her life (Fineman, et al, 1979)

19. Would-be-hero  
These youth set fires and then turn in the alarm or put the fire out to save people and property from harm (Sakheim & Osborn, 1994).

Interestingly, the four most typical categories of juvenile firesetter motives identified by US- based researchers are curiosity, crisis, delinquent and pathological. Another important observation is that different researchers use slightly different terms for the same categories of firesetter typologies. However, four non-US- based researchers produced typologies that show fundamental differences in the way youth firesetters are perceived.

In 1995, Swaffer and Hollin undertook a study of 17 young people who resided in the United Kingdom’s Youth Treatment Services and had been charged with fire-related offenses. The premise of this study was to interview and then explore the self-reported explanations of why each of the 17 youth set fires. The reasons Swaffer and Hollin offered for looking at the self-report of firesetter motives were twofold:

1. The classification systems currently in use do not address the heterogeneity of firesetting and firesetters, but simply place all aspects of firesetting under large umbrella categories (p. 619).
2. The reason for using the self-report was based on Goldstein’s (1990, cited by Swaffer & Hollin, 1995) strategy of using the knowledge and experience of these firesetters as experts.

Swaffer and Hollin (1995) were looking to compare their findings with the explanations given in previous literature for firesetting: (a) sexual dysfunction (Yarnell, 1941); (b) social approval or excitement (Kolko, 1985); (c) revenge (Bradford & Dimock, 1986); and curiosity (Kolko, 1989). Swaffer and Hollin reported their findings, which identified six reasons (listed in Table 6) given by the firesetters for their firesetting:

Table 6

*Six Reasons for Firesetting Identified by Swaffer and Hollin (1995)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Revenge</td>
<td>Five young people reported setting fires for revenge against people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Crime concealment</td>
<td>Three of the young people reported they set fires to conceal their participation in other crimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-injury</td>
<td>Three firesetters (all women) reported they set fires to harm themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Peer group pressure</td>
<td>Three male firesetters reported that they set fires after being pressured by their peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Denial/accidental</td>
<td>Three firesetters denied their firesetting behaviors or denied intentionally setting their fires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Fascination</td>
<td>One male firesetter reported that he was fascinated by fire and described the fire and its consequences vividly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Swaffer and Hollin (1995) concluded that with their 17 firesetters two of the reasons paralleled the literature on reasons for arson: revenge (Bradford & Dimock, 1986; Koson & Dvoskin, 1982; Levin, 1976; Stewart, 1993) and crime concealment (Levin, 1976;
Prins, 1986). Those youth who reported setting fires because of peer pressure corresponded with firesetters who set vandalism fires (Levin, 1976). The female firesetters who set fires to harm themselves did not correspond with an already identified category of firesetters. And, the youth who was fascinated by fire might be diagnosed with the mental health disorder of pyromania.

In Lund, Sweden, Terjestam and Ryden (1996) surveyed 736 children in the Lund School System. They found that the most common three reasons given by these students for setting fires were; (a) wanting to see the fire burn, (b) boredom, and (c) wanting to destroy something.

Cotterall (1999) surveyed 3,031 students in grades 3 through 13, in the City of Greater Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, to look at the extent of fire-play experiences, attraction to fire, and interest in fire activities. His interest was to understand what school-aged children think about and how they act regarding fire. What is interesting about Cotterall’s research is that it was not geared specifically toward firesetters, nor was it looking specifically at children with mental health or arson referrals, like all of the previous studies. Cotterall’s findings are outlined below:

1. Most students set fires just for the fun of it, to destroy something, out of boredom, or to see what will happen. When it came to motivations to start fires, just for fun was the number one reason.

2. Far more students who report fire-play behaviours set fires out of anger, to get attention, or to hurt someone (p. 2).

Cotterall (1999) expressed the following viewpoint about categorizing the motives of firesetters:
Evidence points away from the utility of classifying children or youth and their motives for starting fires into discrete categories (i.e. curiosity firesetter, revenge firesetter). Reasons for starting a fire are not fixed and whatever reasons a student has reported for starting a fire, he or she is likely to report other reasons. Examining the situational differences at the time of a firesetting incident and their relation with the individual characteristics of the child or adolescent would best serve intervention purposes (p. 2).

In 2004, the Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership (EYSIP) completed a report on juvenile firesetters. In this report the researchers stated that none of Fineman’s typologies:

Accurately describe the picture built of secondary firesetters from the fire services review; delinquent firesetters appear to most closely resemble the firesetting groups thought to be responsible for the rise in secondary fires observed in Scotland, but the delinquent firesetting describes more serious behaviours than the secondary fires of concern here, e.g., targeting individuals and properties in hate crimes. The fire service review didn’t highlight serious property damage or a particular lack of empathy of the secondary firesetters (p. 26).

The motivations of secondary firesetters reported by EYSIP are listed in Table 7.
Table 7

*Motivations of Secondary Firesetters Reported by Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership (2004)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Boredom</td>
<td>A need for excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To get a heat</td>
<td>The heat that fire provides on a cold Edinburgh night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To get a chase</td>
<td>Being chased by the fire brigade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To make them seem hard so as to get a girlfriend:</td>
<td>Status that accompanies setting fires, to impress others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Destroying things</td>
<td>Youth that like to destroy things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The EYSIP report (2004) concluded by stating:

What is clear is that looking at firesetting behaviour in the context of young people’s perceptions of themselves and their communities yields a much richer description and suggests solutions to the issue that working from a typology alone would not (p. 50).

The focus of the four non-US-based research studies is on social context rather than pathology, as the reason behind juvenile firesetting. While limited, the move away from the psychological view and corresponding explanation is both provocative and compelling, its very absence in the US-generated literature, reflects an overwhelming presence of the mental health perspective of juvenile firesetting.

There are many different schools of thought on the classification of the motives behind juvenile firesetting and not all researchers agree on the same motives. Even with the push to classify or categorize juvenile firesetters into motive types for reasons of intervention, education or treatment, some researchers still believe that a classification system might not prove to include all firesetter motives. Patterson (1982) in his research
on social learning related that there were many different types and ages of firesetters; and because of these differences, they require different explanations for the motives of their firesetting behavior. Patterson did not provide motive categories for firesetters.

Jones et al. (1994) in their paper, *The Psychosocial Correlates of Fire Disaster Among Children and Adolescents*, suggested that a classification system for firesetters should parallel the motivations that cause juveniles to set fires. Prins (1994) took somewhat of an opposite view and believed that the motivations behind juvenile firesetting were very complex and that researchers should take care in any attempt to generate typologies of firesetting motives.

And, finally, Putnam and Kirkpatrick (2005) stated:

Most theory in behavioral and social sciences seeks to explain and predict behavior. Research, then, is designed to test a theory’s explanatory and predictive powers. At present, assessing the strengths of theoretical formulations of juvenile firesetting behavior is difficult because a comprehensive national research strategy has yet to be designed and implemented. (p. 4)

There is much rhetoric about the motivations behind juveniles who set fires. Much, if not most of the past and present research on juvenile firesetting, has been completed either by researchers in the mental health field or those in academia, not in the fire service. It was also found that most research is based on those firesetters who were referred to mental health, thus the frame of reference for this research is from those who look for mental health issues or problem behaviors as the cause for firesetting. One area of research that has been greatly under-reported when looking at theories of juvenile firesetting are those juvenile firesetters who set school fires. The final section of chapter 2 discusses the current research that focuses specifically on school fires and the juveniles who set them.
School Fires and Firesetting

School Fires

According to historical information on school fires, there have been three devastating school fires in the history of the United States. A synopsis of each of these school fires follows. The first school fire occurred on March 4, 1908 at the Lakeview Elementary School in Collinwood, Ohio. The cause of the fire was said to be wood joists coming in contact with an overheated steam pipe that started the fire. This fire killed 172 students and 2 teachers (Gottschalk, 2002). The second devastating school fire occurred on March 18, 1937, in New London, Texas. A disgruntled school employee who had been reprimanded for smoking and wanted to get back at the school administrators started the New London School fire. He tampered with the gas lines so as to run up the school gas bill. An explosion ensued which killed 294 students and staff (Gottschalk, 2002). The third school fire occurred on December 1, 1958 in Chicago, Illinois at the Our Lady of the Angels School. A fifth grade student lighting a cardboard waste barrel in the school basement started this school fire. The fire claimed the lives of 92 students and 3 nuns.

All of these fires caused community devastation, millions of dollars of property loss, and the most precious loss of all, the loss of life. However, only the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School was started by a school student. The fire at Our Lady of the Angels School caused me to wonder, how prevalent are school fires that are started by school students during the school day?

According to the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in 2002, there were an estimated 14,300
fires in kindergarten through twelfth grade educational institutions, causing an estimated $103,600,000 in property damage and 122 injuries (FEMA, 2004).

The leading cause of these school fires was incendiary or suspicious activity accounting for 37% of all school structure fires. Fifty-two percent of all middle and high school fires have been attributed to incendiary or suspicious activity (FEMA, 2004). The NFIRS report stated that 78% of all school fires occur during the school week and 55% of these fires occur between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. when youth are likely to be at school (FEMA, 2004). Today, deaths from school fires are rare, but injuries per fire were higher in school structure fires than nonresidential structure fires on average per the United States Fire Administration (USFA) (2005). Also according to the USFA (2001):

Each year in the United States, there are an estimated 1,300 fires in high schools, private and prep schools and college dormitories. These fires are responsible for less than 5 deaths, approximately 50 injuries and $4.1 million in property loss annually” (p. 1)

But what about in Phoenix, Arizona? What does the school fire situation look like in and around the Phoenix Area? In 2005, there were a total of 99 school fires occurring during school hours in K-12 educational institutions that were reported to the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program (2006). These school firesetter reports over the past five years along with the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School prompted this research on the motivations of students who set school fires and to wonder: Are they troubled students who dislike school, as was the case with the fire set at Our Lady of the Angels School? Do the motivations for student firesetters follow the motivation typologies found in previous research on firesetters? What does previous research say about school firesetters?
School Firesetters

In Lewis and Yarnell’s (1951), study from 1937–1938 of 238 child firesetters, 61 had set fires in either churches or schools (no differentiation between church or school was given). The reasons these firesetters gave for setting their school fires were predominately based on hatred, revenge, and the desire to destroy the school building, hoping that they would no longer have to attend school. Some of their other reasons included the following:

1. “We didn’t like the looks of the teacher.”
2. “I got a bad report card and thought I’d make a fire and blow it up.”
3. “I was mad, because I didn’t pass.”
4. “I was tired of going to school.”
5. “The teacher picked on me.” (p. 300)

Some of the secondary reasons these students gave for setting the school fires was to see the fire, see the fire engines, and be the hero that discovers the fire. The researchers went on to say that these children might also vandalize school property, steal from teachers and staff, leave obscene notes on the teacher’s desk, and mutilate the teacher’s clothing. Their classroom behavior and schoolwork was poor at best and they showed “a predominately dull or borderline intelligence with special learning disabilities, and all of them were unable to compete in the classroom” (p. 300). Lewis and Yarnell (1951) also stated that children under age 10 rarely set school fires and the most frequent age group of school firesetters is between 12 and 14 years of age.

Wooden and Berkey (1984) found, “The greatest number of fires (37%) set by the delinquent firesetters” were school-related fires (p. 72). The motives for these school fires
were found to be “revenge, spite, or disruption of classroom activities” (p. 77). The median age for the school firesetters in Wooden and Berkey’s (1984) study was 14 and the fires were most often set in the classroom, school closets, under the teacher’s desk, or in the wastebasket. They also found that most of the school firesetters were considered trouble-making students and the fires occurred after being punished by a teacher or school administrator. In the body of current literature, only two examples of differing motives appear.

In an article written by Jeff Meade (1998) titled *Fire Power*, while not a study about school firesetters but rather a compilation of information about school fires written for *Education Week*, Meade discussed school firesetting with juvenile firesetter researcher Paul Schwartzman. Schwartzman suggested that there was no one main reason juvenile firesetters target schools; however, he did suggest the following possible motives behind school firesetting:

1. A prank
2. To get out of final exams
3. Peer pressure
4. Seeking attention

Other possible motives behind school firesetting discussed by Meade (1998) include revenge, school disruption, anger, or no explanation at all.

Hall (2006) reported, “Deliberate fires in schools are often a result of mucking about which gets out of hand” (p. 2). However, according to Hall’s report, Dr. Jack Kennedy, a clinical forensic psychologist, reverted to a pathological explanation, asserting that there was a deeper reason for school fires. Kennedy stated:
For children, school is normally a focal point for their social world. So that’s where they’re going to be exposed to frustrations, to issues of tolerance, and anger. And because they place social controls on children, schools—unfortunately—often annoy them, cause them to be disgruntled, or to feel hard done by. The results can be starting a fire to vent anger, or exact revenge against the school, or against the teacher. It’s rare that there is not some sort of trail or story behind a fire at school. Fires may be like a friend to some of these children, the one thing they feel gives them some power (Hall, 2006, pp. 2-3).

As has been evidenced by the scant research that focuses specifically on school firesetters, little is known about the motivations behind school fires. In Lewis and Yarnell’s (1951) research, all of the school firesetters had a “predominately dull or borderline intelligence with special learning disabilities, and all of them were unable to compete in the classroom” (p. 300). In Wooden and Berkey’s study in 1984, all of the school firesetters were troubled students who set school fires after a teacher or school administrator had punished them. Meade and Hall speculated about the motives of school firesetters, but undertook no actual research to support their hypotheses. So the questions still remain: Do all school firesetters have academic, school behavior and/or mental health problems, like the student who set the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School, and those students reported by Lewis and Yarnell in their 1937 and 1938 study, and those identified in Wooden and Berkey’s study in 1984? And finally, do all school firesetters exhibit the pathologies presented in the research on youth firesetters?
Summary

There has been much research on the phenomenon of pyromania, arson, and firesetting that dates back to the 1800s with Platner (1801, cited by Lewis & Yarnell, 1951), and the term *feuerlust* that Platner used to identify firesetters. The majority of the research from the 1800s through today identifies firesetting as a product of mental illness, conduct disorders, dull-to-low levels of intelligence, mental retardation, learning disabilities, and/or an abusive or neglectful home life. It has also been shown that there is little research specifically identifying the motivations of school firesetters. In an attempt to let the students’ voices be heard, this study directed the focus of firesetting research through a qualitative study documenting self-reported motivations of students who set school fires.

Chapter 3 provides a succinct explanation of the research problem, design, procedures, and methodology, the population and sample, the sources of information, the instrumentation used, the data collection procedures, data analysis, and chapter summary. Chapter 4 reports case histories on each of the firesetter informants and explains and discusses the research findings for each of the research questions. Chapter 5 ends this study with a summary and discussion on the conclusions, and offers recommendations for the fire service, schools, and future youth firesetter researchers.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

Fire is a good servant, but a bad master
17th century proverb
(in Prins, 1994, p. 1)

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to theoretically, conceptually and structurally outline the research methods and data collection procedures used in this study. I reflected on my seven years of experience working with youth firesetters, my 11 1/2 years of experience as a police officer interviewing both juveniles and adults, and research methodology employed in the past (i.e. Chapter 2’s literature review), when considering the types and scope of research and methods used in this study.

Chapter 3 lists the research questions as provided in Chapter 1 and guides the reader through sections titled “Research Design and Procedures,” “Research Methodology,” “Population and Sample,” “Instrumentation,” “Data Collection Procedures,” and “Data Analysis Procedures.”

Within the “Instrumentation” section, validity, reliability, researcher bias, and bracketing interviews are discussed. Besides sources of information, procedures on initial contacts and interview schedules, the “Data Collection Procedures” section includes technical approaches for interviewing children and adolescents. Chapter 3 includes Figure 1 titled “Research design” and Figure 2 titled “Sampling paradigm,” Table 8, titled “A Match of Research Questions and Subquestions to Corresponding Sources of Information and Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures,” which matches each research question to its corresponding source of information and corresponding data analysis and
reporting procedures. As with most any case study research, the research methodology, tables, and figures describing this research evolved and took shape throughout the study.

Restatement of the Problem

The goal of this study was to fill the void in the research regarding the motivations of students who set school fires; and through this process, determine if the school firesetters reported having academic, school behavior or mental health problems prior to the firesetting incident. This was accomplished by interviewing 17 students who set school fires in Phoenix, Arizona, between May 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006, using the following four research questions and corresponding subquestions.

Research Question 1: *What is the academic, school behavior and mental health profile of students who set school fires?*

1a. What is the mean age of school firesetter informants?

1b. What is the mean grade point average of school firesetter informants?

1c. In what extracurricular activities do school firesetter informants report being involved in?

1d. Do school firesetter informants report having school problems prior setting the school fire?

1e. What type of school suspension or expulsion history has the school firesetter informant experienced prior to the school fire?

1f. What mental health issues do the school firesetter informants report prior to the firesetting incident?
1g. How does the school firesetter informant talk about his or her relationship to school?

Research Question 2: What reasons do students give for setting fires at school?

2a. How does the school firesetter informant explain the circumstances surrounding his or her school fire?

2b. What is the main reason the school firesetter informant gives for setting the school fire?

2c. What additional reason(s) does the school firesetter informant give for the school fire?

Research Question 3: What do school firesetters say may keep them and other students from setting future school fires?

3a. What does the school firesetter informant conjecture about setting another fire?

3b. What would prevent the school firesetter informant from setting another school fire?

3c. From the perspective of the school firesetter informant, what can fire departments and schools do to stop students from setting school fires in the future?

Research Question 4: How do the findings of the motivations of school firesetters compare with the previous research on the motivations of non-school firesetters?

4a. How has the motivation for school firesetting been categorized in this research?
4b. How do these categories align with the motivation categories identified in previous research on youth firesetting in general?

Research Design and Procedures

The methodological approach taken in this study was broadly qualitative, although some elements of quantitative research were employed where appropriate. The study corresponds to Stake's (1995) definition of an instrumental case study, “Where the focus of the research is upon providing an insight into an issue” (p. 3) — in this case the motivations of school firesetters.

This study involved interviewing 17 school firesetter informants between April 1, 2005 and June 30, 2006 about the circumstances surrounding their school fires. Institutional Review Board approval to interview youth firesetters was granted (before the prospectus meeting) on September 20, 2004, by Northern Arizona University’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C). Additional information about the school fire and the student firesetter was gathered from the firesetter’s parent or guardian and the school fire referral report completed by the school administrator. These reports are described under the section titled “Instrumentation” in this chapter.

The qualitative information obtained during the school firesetter interviews was coded, categorized, and analyzed using “analytic induction” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 136-137) and then reported in matrix tables (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The quantitative information was gathered from the firesetter’s academic and school behavior history and was analyzed using “descriptive statistics” (Wiersma, 1995, p. 339) to address each demographic question. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the research design process.
**Study Purpose**
The purpose of this study is to gain access to and insight from students who set school fires, to understand what motivates him or her to set a school fire, and to determine if school firesetters report having academic, school behavior, or mental health problems prior to the firesetting incident.

**School Fire Occurrence**
1. Receive referral from a school
2. Invite the firesetter and family to YFS Program

**YFS Program Contacts**
1. Contact school firesetter and parent or guardian at YFS Class
2. Explain study and invite to participate in study
3. Explain confidentiality and informed consent both verbally and in writing
4. Schedule interviews

**Data Collection and Analysis**
1. Interviews
2. School referral reports
3. Database/archival data

Semi-structured open-ended interviews completed with youth and parent or guardian
Research PFD YFS Program Database and archival paper files

Transcribe and code interview data
Analyze quantitative data from database and archival files

1. Develop categories of school firesetters based on the interview and archival data
2. Examine the academic, school behavior or mental health profiles of school firesetters

1. Triangulate the data to determine credibility
2. Use outside researcher to compare conclusions
3. Write the summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations
4. Elaborate on the significance of this study

*Figure 1. Research design*
Research Methodology

As stated in Chapter 1, this study was designed to investigate the self-reported motivations of students who set school fires. Once the topic of study was defined, the researcher was tasked with determining the most appropriate type and method(s) of research. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were investigated to determine which method(s) would be most appropriate for this study. After much investigation it was determined that the best way to understand the motivations of school firesetters was to allow space for the voices of the student firesetters themselves. This meant interviewing each student firesetter to determine why he or she set a school fire. The decision to use qualitative interviewing was further supported by Rubin and Rubin (1995), who stated, “Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (p. 1).

Once the type of research was identified, I was then tasked with determining the appropriate type of methodology. Yin (2003) offered three conditions for selecting a research strategy; “(a) the type of research questions posed, (b) the extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioral events, and (c) the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events” (p. 5).

The research questions that guided this study were “what” and “how” questions: (a) What is the academic, school behavior and mental health profile of students who set fires at school? (b) What is the mean grade point average of the school firesetter informants? (c) In what extracurricular activities do school firesetter informants report being involved in? (d) What type of school suspension or expulsion history has the school firesetter informant experienced prior to the firesetting incident? (e) What mental health
issues do school firesetter informants report prior to the firesetting incident? (f) What is the main reason the school firesetter informant gives for setting the school fire? (g) What additional reason(s) does the school firesetter informant give for the school fire? (h) What does the school firesetter informant conjecture about setting another fire? (i) What would prevent the school firesetter informant from setting another school fire? (j) From the perspective of the school firesetter informant, what can fire departments and schools do to stop students from setting school fires in the future? (k) How does the school firesetter informant talk about his or her relationship to school? (l) How does the school firesetter informant explain the circumstances surrounding his or her school fire? (m) How has motivation for firesetting been categorized in previous research? (n) How do these categories align with the motivations categories identified in previous research in general?

According to Yin (2003) “how” questions are “more explanatory and are likely to lead to the use of case studies, histories and/or experiments as the preferred research strategies” (p. 6). Yin stated, “A ‘what’ question is a justifiable rationale for conducting an exploratory study” (p. 6); however, any one of the five research strategies (experiment, survey, archival analysis, history, and case study) described by Yin can be used. When looking at Yin’s second condition, the extent of control over behavioral events, the researcher must determine to what extent he or she can control the behavioral events associated with his or her study. If the researcher has control over or can manipulate behavioral events, Yin asserted that the best research method would be an experimental type of study. If the researcher has little to no control over behavioral events, Yin argued the case study or historical study is preferred. In this study, the researcher had no control
over who will set a school fire or when a school fire will occur, thus indicating the use of a case study methodology over other types of research methods.

The final condition Yin (2003) identified when determining a research strategy was the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events (p. 7). If a study looks at current issues, then an experimental, survey, or case study format would be indicated. If the study looks at issues from the past, then a historical study would be recommended. This study examines current school firesetting incidents rather than historical school fires as a basis for research, which indicated the use of a case, experimental, or survey method of research.

Using Yin’s (2003) three conditions for determining research strategies, I determined that based on the study purpose and problem statement, the most appropriate study methodology was a case study. Yin (1984) defined the case study research method as, “An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p. 23).

Once the research methodology was narrowed down to a case study research design, I looked to Merriam’s (1998) work on case study research to support my decision. Merriam stated that a case study is “selected for its uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to” (p. 33). In the proposed research study, little research existed as to the motivations of school firesetters, thus the knowledge gained from this study was new and unique.

Finally, Stake’s (1995) three criteria for deciding if a case study design should be used were examined. The three criteria are as follows; “(a) Which cases are likely to
maximize what is learned? (b) How easy is it to access research informants? (c) Carefully consider the uniqueness and context of alternative selections, for those may aid or restrict our learning” (p. 4). In response to Stake’s first criteria, the most appropriate way to maximize what is learned was to ask the student firesetter why he or she set the school fire. Examining previous research on the motivations of firesetters shows the motivations of firesetters in general, but does not give specifics as to why students set school fires. Secondly, because of my work with the PFD’s YFS Program, access to school firesetters was not restricted. In response to Stake’s final criteria, not all school firesetters were invited to participate in this study. Purposeful sampling was used to determine which school firesetters met the criteria outlined in this study. I was aware that the information gained may aid or restrict what is learned from this study.

Once a case study research design was chosen, the next step was to determine what type of case study should be used: a single or multiple-case, case study design? Yin (2004) argued that with a multiple-case, case study design “the data from multiple cases can strengthen your case study findings and make your interpretations more robust” (p. XV). Conceptually, interviewing 17 school firesetters allows for direct replication of future research. The case study also allows for an in-depth and detailed understanding of the motivations of school firesetters.

Population and Sample

Population. The population studied was students who set school fires during school hours between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006. The target population was those students who set school fires in Phoenix, Arizona area schools and were referred to the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program. The target population was both male and female students, ages 8 to 17, who attended the PFD’S YFS Program. The
following section details the rationale for the number and age of the students interviewed for this study.

Sample. The sample selection process used in this study was the purposeful sampling of 17 student firesetter informants who set a fire in a Phoenix area school between May 1, 2005 and May 1, 2006. Purposeful sampling was chosen because as Patton (1990) so eloquently stated:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term “purposeful sampling” (p. 169).

According to Merriam (1998), purposeful sampling begins with determining the selection criteria for the people to be studied. In this study, the selection procedure began when the PFD’s YFS Program received a referral from a Phoenix area school administrator indicating that one of his or her students had set a school fire. The student and his or her parent or guardian were then notified by telephone that the fire department had received a referral from the student’s school administrator regarding a fire the student had set. During the telephone conversation with the parent or guardian, the YFS Program Manager invited the student informant and parent or guardian to the next scheduled YFS Class. The verbal invitation was then followed by a written invitation mailed to the student’s residence (see Appendix D). If the student and his or her parent or guardian attended the YFS Class, and met the following criteria, they were invited to participate in the study. The sampling criteria were as follows:
1. The student informant and his or her parent or guardian must have attended the Phoenix fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program prior to the interview so that all discipline requirements by the school had been completed. This is important so that the student firesetter informant did not feel pressured to complete the interview as part of the discipline process and could freely relate the firesetting experience without the fear of repercussions or further discipline.

2. The student informant age group between 8 years of age and no older than 17 years of age was chosen for several reasons. According to Poole and Lamb (1998), the use of the cognitive interview for children under the ages of 7 or 8 may be problematic. Developmentally, younger children may be unable to give repeated recall information. This means that when asked repeatedly about an incident, the child may feel pressured to change his or her answer because he or she interprets the repeated requests to mean that his or her answer was not good enough (p. 89). Secondly, the researcher has spent the past 21 years interviewing youth ages 3 through 17 and has found that frequently children under the age of 8 have a harder time articulating the motivation for their actions. The third reason for interviewing children aged 8 through 17 is that children over the age of 17 are considered adults and this study is not examining adult firesetters. The final reason is that 87% of the school firesetter referrals received by the YFS Program from 1999 through 2005, were 8 to 17 years of age (PFD, 2006).
3. The student informant must have set the fire himself or herself without the participation of others in the firesetting incident. If others were involved in the firesetting incident, the researcher would have a much harder time understanding the clear motivation for the fire. The information could become very convoluted and student informants might blame each other for the fire incident causing the researcher to be unable to elicit a clear motivation for the fire.

4. The final criterion was that the student informant must be able to speak English. The researcher has little knowledge of other languages and the fear of translation errors is a real concern for the researcher.

The sample number of 17 students were chosen based on the mean number of school firesetter referrals from 1999 through 2005. The total number of school firesetter referrals from 1999 through 2005 was 478. The mean average per year for those seven years was 68 school firesetter referrals. Interviewing 17 school firesetters would constitute 25% of the mean of school firesetters per year from 1999 to 2005. Interviewing 17 students allowed for direct replication of future research. It also allowed for independent analytic conclusions of each of the 17-firesetter interviews, which is more powerful than from a single, double, or even triple case study (Yin, 2003, p. 53). Figure 2 is an illustration of the sampling paradigm.
**Population**
Students that set school fires between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006 and were referred to the PFD YFS Program.
(n = 104)

**Target Population**
Male and female school firesetters ages 8 to 17 who speak English and were referred to the PFD YFS Program.
(n = 93)

**Sample Pool**
Male and female firesetters ages 8 to 17 who attended the Phoenix Fire Department’s YFS Program and speak English and their parent or guardian were invited to participate in this study.
(n = 54)

**Sample**
The first 17 youth firesetters who agreed to participate in this study.

![Diagram of sample participants]

*Figure 2. Sampling paradigm*
Instrumentation

The following is a description of the instruments used in this study: the Student Biographical Information form (see Appendix E), the Fire Incident Analysis Child [FIAC] form (see Appendix F), the Fire Incident Analysis Parent [FIAP] form (see Appendix G), and the School Referral Form (see Appendix A). The biographical form was written by the researcher and the FIAC and FIAP forms were written by Kolko and Kazdin (1994). The Fire Incident Analysis Child (FIAC) is the child’s version, and the Fire Incident Analysis Parent (FIAP) is the parent or guardian’s version. The School Referral Form was written and used by the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program.

The Student Biographical Information form was designed to obtain the firesetter informant’s biographical information. The form includes questions about gender, age, ethnicity, grade level, school type, grade point average, extracurricular activities, school behavior problems, suspension or expulsion issues, the like or dislike of school, and discipline received for the school fire (see Appendix E for the Student Biographical Information form).

The FIAC and FIAP were chosen for the following reasons; (a) They were designed to illicit motives or reasons for the informant’s firesetting; (b) the forms have been used over 1,000 times since 1993, as a means to identify the motives behind youth firesetting; and (c) there are very few interview forms that attempt to identify the motives behind firesetting incidents (see Appendix F for the Fire Incident Analysis Child [FIAC]; see Appendix G for the Fire Incident Analysis Parent [FIAP). On August 19, 2003, Dr.
Kolko sent the FIAC and FIAP forms to the researcher, with his permission to use the forms in this study.

I developed the School Referral Form in 2001, as a way for school administrators throughout the Phoenix area to refer a student who set a school fire to a youth firesetter program. The form was also designed as a method for the Phoenix Fire Department to capture pertinent information about the school firesetting issues in Phoenix, Arizona. For this study, the information from the School Referral Form was used to compare the information received from the firesetter informant and his or her parent or guardian as a way to triangulate the data for reliability (see Appendix A for the School Referral Form).

Validity and reliability. In both quantitative and qualitative research, the researcher is tasked with the need to test and demonstrate that his or her research is credible. In quantitative research, credibility is dependent upon the construction of the test instrument. In qualitative research “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Golafshani (2003) explained the differences this way:

It seems when quantitative researchers speak of research validity and reliability they are usually referring to a research that is credible, while the credibility of a qualitative research depends on the ability and effort of the researcher. Although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research. Instead, terminology that encompasses both, such as credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness is used (p. 600).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “The terms reliability and validity are essential criterion for quality in quantitative paradigms; in qualitative paradigms the
terms credibility, neutrality or confirmability, consistency or dependability and
applicability or transferability are to be the essential criteria for quality” (p. 300).

One way the credibility of a qualitative study is achieved is through the
triangulation of data. Triangulation of data allows for the comparison of various types
and sources of data gained throughout the study in order to achieve consistency of the
results. Scriven (1991) defined triangulation as, “The attempt to get a fix on a
phenomenon or measurement by approaching it via several independent routes” (pp. 364-
365). Patton (1987) explained triangulation as:

- comparing observational data with interview data; it means comparing what
  people say in public with what they say in private; it means checking the
  consistency of what people say over time; and it means comparing the
  perspectives of people with different points of view. It means validating
  information obtained through interviews by checking program documents and
  other written evidence that can corroborate what interview respondents report.

In this study, triangulation of the data was accomplished in the following ways:

1. The school fire referral report will be compared to the student’s report of
   the school fire. This is a way to check for consistency of the student’s
   report.

2. The student’s FIAC will be compared with the parent’s FIAP for
   consistency of responses. This is a way to check for consistency of the
   student’s report.
3. Information collected during the interviews will be checked against information obtained from the archival documents and the school fire report.

Other ways that reliability and validity are established in a qualitative study is by using Yin’s (2003) three principles of data collection. These principles “deal with the problems of establishing construct validity and reliability; (1) Use of multiple sources of data, (2) Creation of a case study database, and, (3) Maintain a chain of evidence” (pp. 97-105). In this study, I utilized the in-depth firesetter informant interviews, parent or guardian interviews, and the school fire referral reports as the multiple sources of data described in Yin’s (2003) Principle 1. The audiocassette taping of the interviews, the school fire referral report, the interview narratives and the study database provided the evidentiary substance suggested in Yin’s (2003) Principle 2. Yin’s (2003) Principle 3, was maintained in the following ways:

1. The firesetter informant and his or her parent or guardian completed informed consent/assent documents.

2. The date, time, and location of each interview were documented.

3. The interview was audiotaped using two separate cassette tape recorders to ensure that at least one recorder was functioning.

4. Notes were taken during the interview to supplement the audiotape. The referral documents, audiotapes, interview notes, and informed consent documents were placed in a sealed envelope and are being kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher’s residence.

5. The researcher will transcribe the audiotapes.
6. The transcriptions will be coded and then placed in matrix form to identify categories of firesetter motivations.

7. The chain of evidence will be made available to any researcher with questions regarding the outcome of this study so that he or she can trace the evidentiary process from start to finish or finish to start.

Another way I improved the validity and reliability was through the use of an outside researcher who had no stake in the outcome of the study. The outside researcher was used to check content validity and logical analysis of the interview data by comparing the conclusions she drew from the data, with the conclusions I drew from the data. One final way to improve the reliability and validity of this study was to identify researcher bias.

*Researcher bias.* How I view the world may have influenced the results of the study. Therefore, it was imperative that I recognized and understood my views regarding youth firesetting. I have spent seven years working for the Phoenix, Arizona Fire Department as the Program Manager for the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program. During the seven years of employment with the fire department, I have had the opportunity to interview over 4,500 youth firesetters and their family members. I have also had the opportunity to attend numerous youth firesetter intervention program conferences and collaborate with youth firesetter interventionists throughout the U.S., Canada, England, New Zealand, and Scotland. Because of these experiences, I may have certain biases about youth firesetting. These biases could be cause to question the validity of the study. To overcome the issue of bias, I participated in two bracketing interviews with two research professors from Northern Arizona University.
Bracketing interviews. Thomas and Pollio (2002) defined the goal of a bracketing interview as follows: “The bracketing interview is to highlight to the researcher his/her pre-understandings about the topic of investigation” (p. 33). I participated in two bracketing interviews to identify my own preconceptions concerning youth firesetting. The results of these bracketing interviews were as follows:

1. There are numerous reasons why youth set fires.
2. Many of the reasons that youth set fires have nothing to do with wanting to damage property, burn buildings down, or hurt others.
3. Youth firesetters come from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.
4. Both males and females set fires; however, males are more likely to set fires.
5. Some youth firesetters will not stop setting fires even after they have attended either an intervention program or counseling sessions.
6. Some schools may not refer youth firesetters to a youth firesetter intervention program because the school administrator does not want negative publicity that may be associated with the school or the fire or may not refer a youth firesetter because school personnel do not believe firesetting is a serious issue.
7. Some school administrators may not refer a student firesetter to a youth firesetter intervention program because they do not know that a program exists.
8. Some parents or guardians believe that youth firesetting is just a “phase” children go through and will not bring the child to a firesetter intervention program.

9. Some parents or guardians believe there is nothing wrong with their child setting a fire and will refuse to bring the child to a firesetter intervention program.

10. Some parents or guardians encourage their child to play with fire and fireworks.

11. Some youth firesetters suffer from severe mental illness and will not be helped by an intervention program because the illness supersedes the child’s ability to learn.

12. Some youth firesetters use fire as a way to threaten and intimidate others and to destroy property.

13. Some youth firesetters experiment with fire as a way to quell a curiosity.

14. Some youth firesetters set fires as a cry for help.

15. Some youth firesetters set fires to show off to peers.

16. Some youth firesetters set fires out of anger.

17. Some youth firesetters are unable or unwilling to identify or explain the reasons they set a fire.

18. Approximately 25% of youth firesetters suffer from Attention Deficit disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

19. There has been an increase in the number of reported school fires in Phoenix, Arizona since 1999.

In addition to the bracketing interviews, credibility, consistency and dependability
of the research results was ensured by strategies that included data triangulation, the use of multiple data sources, a case study database, an audit trail, and a review of the research results by a researcher who had no stake in the study.

*Data Collection Procedures*

The main method of data collection was in-depth interviews. This method was chosen because, as Seidman (1998) so eloquently stated, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 3). Confining interviewing to parents, school administrators, fire investigators, or firefighters would reveal the adults’ perception of firesetter motivation, not a school firesetter’s perception.

The only means to obtaining the true motive behind and meaning of the school firesetting incident was to ask the student himself or herself to make meaning of the fire incident. Kolko and Kazdin (1994) stated, “The absence of children’s perspectives on their firesetting episodes is a significant limitation to depicting the personal and situational influences of individual incidents” (p. 114). This study was proposed to address this limitation by privileging the children’s perspective. Achenbach and Edelbrock (1987) supported this strategy by stating that besides the importance of a child’s perspective on firesetting and the covert nature of the firesetting, the child’s report may be the only means of report for his or her firesetting incident. The choice to interview 17 school firesetters allowed for independent analytic conclusions of each firesetter interview and was more powerful than from a single, double, or triple case study. Another advantage of interviewing school firesetters was that the context of the 17 cases would likely differ; and if a common theme or conclusion emerges from these
cases, the external generalizability will be greatly expanded, thus making the findings more robust.

However, with the advantages of interviewing 17 school firesetters under the age of 18 comes some special considerations when using children in research.

Interviewing children and adolescents. According to Zwiers and Morrissette (1999), “Few researchers have made a consistent effort to include the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and specific statements of children in their empirical investigations.” When the authors were preparing a chapter on the research interview with children, their review “turned up only three articles dealing specifically with the details of research interviewing with children, and, only two book chapters were uncovered” (pp. 127-128).

In Hatch’s (1995) book on qualitative research in early childhood settings, he indicated that there is little available methodological or ethical guidelines on how to interview children for research purposes. For these reasons, I looked to the literature on investigative interviewing of children in the human services for guidance in the development of interview strategies.

According to Zweirs and Morrissette (1999):

When imagining the interview experience through the eyes of a child, the objective centers on making children comfortable enough to establish trust, enhance communication, and facilitate disclosure. The inherent challenge of interviewing children involves striking a balance between the formal and the informal aspects of the process. Interactions need to be formal enough to cover the essential content (e.g. details regarding the presenting problem) yet informal enough to be flexible and responsive to children (e.g. timing and pacing). The
overall interview environment, including the personality of professionals and the physical structure of the interview room, is critical to effective interviewing with children. If the interview room is not perceived as welcoming, relaxing, and safe, attempts to work effectively with children may be counterproductive or futile (pp. 49-50).

Along with the above stated considerations come some other considerations when interviewing children for research. According to Zwiers and Morrissette (1999), “The first consideration must be for the well-being of children involved. Ideally, the collection of research data will be at best positive and rewarding for the child participant, at worst innocuous and benign” (p. 136). In this study, only those firesetter informants who had completed the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program, had already received discipline, and were willing to participate in the study were selected to participate. The entire study was explained to the student in both verbal and written form before the interview was begun. The student was informed that if he or she decided to participate in the study, but decided at any time during the study that he or she did not want to continue, all he or she had to do was tell the researcher that he or she did not want to continue and the audiotape and the consent, assent, and interview forms were destroyed. The researcher also had a mental health professional available in case the student showed signs of emotional discomfort or distress when reflecting about the firesetting incident.

The second consideration identified by Zwiers and Morrissette (1999) was that of informed consent:

Parents/guardians must be the first line of permission obtained, and it is the researcher’s responsibility and duty to inform them as fully as possible about the
goals of the research, the necessity for the research, the manner in which the research will be conducted, and any possible negative or positive effects on their child(ren) (pp. 138-139).

Prior to any school firesetter interview, I fully explained to the parent or guardian both verbally and in writing the research goals, the need for the research, the interview process, and possible negative or positive effects on their child. Once the parent or guardian gave his or her permission for the child to participate in the study, the child was given the same explanation about the study and could make the ultimate decision about whether he or she was willing to participate in the study.

The third and final consideration identified by Zwiers and Morrissette (1999) was how the data will be used. “It will be the researcher’s responsibility to ensure confidentiality of the raw data and participant identity” (p. 140). In this study, the student was identified only by the pseudonym of his or her choosing. The case files and audiotapes were kept in a locked drawer at my residence so that confidentiality was maintained.

When looking for an instrument to use that would elicit the motivations of school firesetters, the researcher used Yarrow’s (1960) three considerations as a guide in deciding on the instrument:

1. Children should readily understand questions.
2. The meaning and interpretation of questions should not vary significantly from one child to another.
3. The format of questions should not lead children to any particular response.

Kolko and Kazdin’s (1994) FIAC seemed to best fit with Yarrow’s three considerations. To test this assumption, the FIAC (see Appendix F) was tested with five
children ages 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 (those tested were the researcher’s friends children) to see how the questions would be answered. The children reported that the questions on the FIAC were very “straight forward,” “easily understood,” made them think, and allowed for open lines of communication with the interviewer.

Sources of information. The data used for this study was from the archives of the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program, which has the largest youth firesetter database in the state of Arizona. The information obtained was from the program’s database and archival paper files from the years 1999 through 2005. The archival paper files included the Youth Firesetter Referral Form, the School Firesetter Referral Form and the Juvenile Probation Firesetter Referral Form. The data obtained were the totals of school firesetting incidents, the mean number of school firesetters since 1999, ages, grade level, gender, ethnic origin, location of the fire, the ignition source, monetary damage, and discipline received by the firesetter. The other source of information used was the school firesetters’ school record information. This information included the school firesetter informant’s GPA, school behavior and suspension or expulsion information. This data was used to triangulate data received from the school firesetter informant and his or her parent or guardian as another way to increase study credibility.

Institutional Review Board. It is the policy of Northern Arizona University that when research involves human subjects, a comprehensive review of the research design be completed, reviewed, and approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the start of the data collection process. The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that the risk to human subjects is minimal and that an explanation of the study’s risks and
benefits is thoroughly explained to each participant. Included in the IRB Application and Approval was a detailed explanation of the proposed study, copies of the assent and consent forms, the Phoenix Fire Department’s letter of agreement to participate in the study, the original IRB Approval letter and the Renewal Approval letter (see Appendix C).

*Initial contact.* Students who were identified as setting a school fire between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006 and were referred to the Phoenix Fire Department's Youth Firesetter Intervention Program by either a school administrator, fire investigator or juvenile probation officer were eligible to participate in this study. Through the referral process, the student and his or her parent or guardian were contacted in person at a Youth Firesetter Intervention Class and an explanation of the study was given in written and verbal form. The student and his or her parent were then asked if they wanted to participate in this study.

*Interview schedule.* If the parent or guardian and the student agreed to voluntarily participate in this study, an interview date and time was scheduled for the family. Once at the scheduled interview, an in-depth explanation of the study, informed consent, confidentiality, and study risks and benefits were given in both written and verbal form. If the family agreed to participate, the parent or guardian and student firesetter informant were asked to sign informed consent and/or assent documents (see Appendices C). The parent or guardian and firesetter informant were then interviewed using the “Student Biographical Information” form (see Appendix E) and the FIAC and FIAP forms (see Appendices F and G). Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a private conference room at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration.
Building, a fire station, or the school where the fire occurred. Each participant was identified with an incident number and a pseudonym. If the participant agreed, each interview was recorded using an audiocassette recorder and a laptop computer. All written and recorded data were sealed and stored in a locked filing cabinet at my residence. Archival data from the Phoenix Fire Department's Youth Firesetter Intervention Program was examined as a secondary data set.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected for this study was in both quantitative and qualitative form. The quantitative data obtained was the demographic data from the “Student Biographical Information” form and was analyzed using descriptive statistics to address each demographic question. The responses to the qualitative interviews with the student informant and parent or guardian was analyzed using “analytic induction” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 136-137).

The School Referral Form data and the data from the informant and parent or guardian interviews were compared using data triangulation to identify similarities or differences in responses about the fire incident. Triangulation of the data was also used as a way to identify for the reliability of responses among the student informants, parents or guardians, and school administrators. Table 8 displays the matrix to be used to match the research questions and subquestions to the sources of information and the data analysis and reporting procedures. The decision to use a matrix of categories enabled the researcher to discern patterns of firesetting motivators.
### Table 8

A Match of Research Questions and Subquestions to Corresponding Sources of Information and Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions and subquestions</th>
<th>Corresponding Sources of Information</th>
<th>Corresponding Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 1: What are the academic, school behavior and mental health profiles of students who set school fires?</td>
<td>Student Biographical Information Sheet and interview questions.</td>
<td>Summary of descriptive statistics, axial coding, matrix display, and summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. What is the mean age of school firesetter informants?</td>
<td>Informant’s age</td>
<td>Summary of descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation/summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. What is the mean GPA of school firesetter informants?</td>
<td>What was the student’s last school GPA?</td>
<td>Summary of descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation/summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d. Do school firesetter informants report having school problems prior to starting the school fire?</td>
<td>Any behavior problems at school prior to fire?</td>
<td>Axial coding, matrix display and summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1e. What type of school suspension or expulsion history has the school firesetter informant experienced prior to the school fire?</td>
<td>Any mental health disorders prior to school fire?</td>
<td>Summary of descriptive statistics: summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1f. What mental health issues do the school firesetter informants report prior to the fire?</td>
<td>Has informant ever been suspended or expelled from school prior to the firesetting incident?</td>
<td>Axial coding, matrix display, vignette and summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1g. Were you arrested and charged for the school fire?</td>
<td>FIAC Question 16b: Were you arrested for the school fire?</td>
<td>Summary of descriptive statistics: mean and standard deviation/summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1h. What type of school discipline did the school firesetter informant receive?</td>
<td>Discipline received for school fire?</td>
<td>Axial coding, matrix display, vignette and summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1i. How does the school firesetter informant talk about his or her relationship to school</td>
<td>Does the informant like school? If yes, why? If no, why not?</td>
<td>Axial coding, matrix display, vignette and summary narrative.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions and subquestions</th>
<th>Corresponding Sources of Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Table display and summary narratives</td>
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Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to theoretically, conceptually and structurally outline the research methods and data collection procedures used in this study. Chapter 3 set the stage for understanding the research process from identifying the research problem to analyzing the research data.

To determine student motivation for firesetting and the academic, school behavior and mental health profiles of student firesetters, the research method used in this study involved interviewing 17 student firesetters who, during school hours, set fires at school. The multiple-case, case study design allowed the researcher to use in-depth interviewing to determine the motivation behind the school fire and to identify the academic, school behavior and mental health profiles of the student firesetter informants. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the student informant and his or her parent or guardian who were willing to participate in this research.

In Chapter 4, the data in this study was analyzed and explained both quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics, axial coding, matrix displays, table displays, and summary narratives. Chapter 5 provides the study summary, conclusions, recommendations, and how the study results could impact schools, fire departments, and mental health services in the future.
CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

When we have to tell what we have seen and found, it is our business to give a true account, disguising nothing and keeping nothing back. But let us be careful not to speak as if our little plummets had sounded the depth of the universe

Professor L.C. Miall
(In Prins, 1994, p. 27)

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain access to and insight from students who set school fires, to understand the motivations for the school fires and to determine if school firesetters report having academic, school behavior or mental health problems prior to the firesetting incident. The prime example would be that of the fifth-grade student who set the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School in 1958 and those school firesetters studied by Lewis and Yarnell in the 1940’s and Wooden and Berkey in the 1980’s.

The sample of school firesetter informants who participated in this study were 17 students aged 10 to 17, who set school fires between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006. The students who participated in this study, were referred to the Phoenix Fire Department Youth Firesetter Intervention Program by their school administrators and or the juvenile court as part of the discipline they received for their school fire.

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to present the findings of these seventeen student interviews by gaining insight from the student as to what motivated him or her to set the school fire. Chapter 4 is divided into seven sections that include; the Introduction, School Firesetter Informant Profiles, Research Question One, Research Question Two, Research
Question Three, Research Question Four, and a Chapter Summary. The purpose of each section of Chapter 4 is defined below.

The purpose of section two is to introduce each of the student firesetters to the reader by providing a snapshot of each of the student’s academic, family, school behavior and mental health backgrounds, information about the school firesetting incident, the motives for the school fire, the students feelings about school, and the discipline received for the firesetting incident.

Section three provides the findings to Research Question 1 and its related subquestions: What are the academic, school behavior, and mental health profiles of students who set school fires?

1a. What is the mean age of school firesetter informants?

1b. What is the mean grade point average of school firesetter informants?

1c. In what extracurricular activities do school firesetter informants report being involved in?

1d. Do school firesetter informants report having school problems prior to starting the school fire? If so, what types of problems?

1e. What type of school suspension or expulsion history has the school firesetter informant experienced prior to the school fire?

1f. What mental health issues do school firesetter informants report prior to the firesetting incident?

1g. How does the school firesetter informant talk about his or her relationship to school?
Section four provides the findings of Research Question 2 and its related subquestions: *What reasons do students give for setting fires at school?*

2a. How does the school firesetter informant explain the circumstances surrounding his or her school fire?

2b. What is the main reason the school firesetter informant gives for setting the school fire?

2c. What additional reason(s) does the school firesetter informant give for the school fire?

Section five provides the findings to Research Question 3 and its related subquestions: *What do student firesetters say may prevent them and other students from setting future school fires?*

3a. What does the school firesetter informant conjecture about setting another fire?

3b. What would prevent the school firesetter informant from setting another school fire?

3c. From the perspective of the school firesetter informant, what can fire departments and schools do to stop students from setting school fires in the future?

Section six provides the findings to Research Question 4 and its related subquestions: *How do the findings of the motivations of school firesetters compare with the previous research on the motivations of firesetters in general?*

4a. How has the motivation for school firesetting been categorized in this research?

4b. How do these categories align with the motivation categories identified in previous research on firesetting in general?
The purpose of section seven is to provide a summary of Chapter 4 and an introduction to Chapter 5.

Data Presentation: School Firesetter Informant Profiles

This was an exploratory case study of the self-reported motivations of students who set school fires. From April 1, 2005 through May 31, 2006, 104 students were referred to the PFD YFS Program for setting school fires (PFD, 2006). Fifty-four of those school firesetters met the criteria for inclusion in this study. The first 17 school firesetters and his or her parent(s) or guardian(s) who agreed to participate in this study made up the study sample. The 17 student informants included 13 males and 4 females who ranged in age from 10 to 17 years old and attended 4th through 11th grades. The ethnic makeup of the sample included Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic school firesetters who attended either public or charter elementary, middle, or senior high schools. The student firesetter interviews were completed between May 1, 2005 and June 30, 2006. The interviews were held at either the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building, the fire station closest to the student’s residence or the student’s school. Prior to the beginning of the interviews, an explanation of the study was given in both verbal and written form to each of the study participants. All questions and concerns were addressed, and the participants and researcher signed the informed consent and assent documents.

In this study, individual in-depth interviews were completed with each student and his or her parent or guardian. During the interviews, each student was asked to expound on the circumstances surrounding his or her school fire and the motivation(s) behind the school fire. The type of interview questions asked made it necessary for the student to reflect on the situations before, during and after the fire, his or her reason(s) for
the fire, his or her feelings about the fire, and the discipline he or she received after the fire. The act of reflecting on one’s actions is not an easy task, especially when the actions involve a negative behavior such as firesetting. Clark (2004) defines reflection as:

Thinking for an extended period of time by linking recent experiences to earlier ones in order to promote a more complex and interrelated mental schema. The thinking involves looking for commonalities, differences, and interrelations beyond their superficial elements. The goal is to develop higher order thinking skills (p.1).

According to Falls (2006), “Reflecting on one’s experiences is a difficult task for adults, for adolescents who are not often asked to reflect nor presented with an opportunity to do so, it can be daunting” (p. 94). In this study, not only were students asked to reflect on their responses to the questions, but they were also asked to reflect on the action of firesetting for which they all received some type of discipline. Because they were asked to reflect on a situation that caused them to receive discipline, at times it was difficult for the student to verbally express his or her feelings, perceptions and, reasons for the school fire. When the student found it hard to reflect on or verbally express information about the firesetting incident, a technique known as probing was used to allow him or her to reflect on and then explain his or her responses. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005):

Probes are techniques used to keep a discussion going while providing clarification. Probes ask the interviewee to keep talking on the matter at hand, to complete an idea, fill in a missing piece, or request clarification of what was said. Other probes ask for examples, or evidence for particular points. Probes elicit
more details without changing the focus of the questioning (p. 137).

In this study, the Student Biographical Information Form, the FIAC and the FIAP were used as guides to structure the interviews and to keep the focus of the interview on the research questions. Probing was used to manage the conversation, clarify responses, fill in the gaps of missing information, and keep the interview on topic.

The results of the student interviews are presented in individual profiles. Prior to the narrative profiles, there is a table that provides the reader with a snapshot of each student firesetter informant. Table 9 gives the reader a visual description of the student profiles. The last three columns are dates, the date of referral to the YFS Program, the date of attendance at the YFS Program and the date of the student interview.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Firesetter</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Living Situation</th>
<th>Grade In School</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Extra Curricular Activities</th>
<th>Previous School Behavior Problems</th>
<th>Previous Suspension Expulsions</th>
<th>Date of Referral</th>
<th>Attendance Date at PFD YFS Program</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Cory</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mom and sister</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8/12/2005</td>
<td>9/10/2005</td>
<td>9/10/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Firesetter</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Living Situation</td>
<td>Grade In School</td>
<td>GPA</td>
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<td>Date of Referral</td>
<td>Date at PFD YFS Program</td>
<td>Date of Interview</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tony</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mom, stepdad, siblings</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12/12/2005</td>
<td>12/12/05</td>
<td>12/15/2005</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Due to ethical and confidentiality considerations when interviewing juveniles, each student was asked to choose a pseudonym for him- or her-self prior to the interview. Also, any school name was identified with the letters ABC, so that the utmost care was given to maintain the confidentiality of the student and his or her school. The order in which these case studies appear is the order in which the students were interviewed.

Bob

*It was boring in the morning and I wanted to have some fun.*

*I wanted to see what it would do*

On June 11, 2005, Bob, a Puerto Rican 12-year-old male, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department’s Administration Building regarding a fire he set at his school. During the interview, Bob related that he was originally from New York State and had moved to Arizona where he was living with his mom, aunt, and three brothers. Bob stated his previous school experiences were not good, “I got kicked out of ten schools in New York; I hated school there.” His mother corroborated that Bob had been expelled of ten schools in New York for throwing chairs and having tantrums. At the time of the school fire, Bob was in the 7th grade at a charter middle school, maintained a 3.0 GPA, and was not involved in any extracurricular school activities. Bob went on to state that prior to this fire, he had never set a fire at school. When asked how he felt about school, he replied, “I like school because of math and science.”

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Bob set fire to a napkin on the playground slide with a lighter he had found on the school grounds. The only damage caused by the fire was to the napkin and a small grassy area. The discipline he received was an out-of-school suspension and mandatory
attendance at the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program. No monetary assessment was made as to the damages.

On the day of his school fire, Bob related the following occurrence:

When I came to school, I went to the slide. I found a lighter, so I picked it up and I lit this napkin up and then put it out, but other kids smelled some fire and told the teacher they smelled smoke. When asked why he set the fire he replied, “Because I was bored in the morning and wanted to have fun. . . . I wanted to see what it would do.” He also stated, “I never wanted to burn the school down or anything like that.” He also explained that being mad at a teacher, administrator, or student was not the reason for setting the fire.

When asked if he would ever set another fire, he answered, “No, I don’t want to get in trouble or go to jail.” When asked what the fire department could do to keep other students from setting a school fire he said, “Like, show them a jail cell and say that’s where they’re gonna be if you do it again.”

After Bob’s interview I spoke with his mother who corroborated what Bob had said. She also reported that Bob suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder but has never been diagnosed with a learning disability.

Jack

*I was mad at the teacher because every time I go into that class, it just makes me mad*

On June 7, 2006, Jack, a 17-year-old White male, was interviewed at Phoenix Fire Station 52 regarding his school fire. Jack stated that he lives with his parents and older sister and has lived in Arizona his entire life. At the time of the school fire, Jack was in the tenth grade at a
public high school, had maintained a 3.0 GPA, and was involved in the school drum line. In his response to his feelings about school, Jack explained that he did not like school because there was “only one good teacher at this school and the school administration works against us. . . . The administration is unfair and bends to parent pressures and does not treat all students the same.” He gave an example of a student who was only suspended for two days even though he shot the back of a female student’s neck with an aerosol can and a lighter. Even though Jack does not like school, he plans on going to college and majoring in music and minoring in business. Jack said that he had only been in trouble at school once before when “I was caught talking in class.” He said that he has never been suspended or expelled from any school prior to the firesetting incident.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Jack lit the carpet on fire in his English classroom with a Zippo lighter he brought from home. He said that it was his dad’s lighter and that his father had not given him permission to have it. The damage caused by the fire was a small singe mark on the carpet. The discipline he received for the school fire was a five-day out-of-school suspension, mandatory counseling, and attendance at the YFS Program. The school administrator did not make an estimate as to the cost to repair the carpet.

On the day of the school fire Jack related the following:

Pretty much it was just me sitting at my desk and then all my friends wanting to find a way to make my teacher mad because my English teacher did not teach us one thing the entire year. Then, I don’t know, I just didn’t really care, I was tired, it was 8:00 in the morning and they thought of the funny idea of spraying deodorant around the room. Sure
whatever, I don’t care. I lit it, it didn’t even, you know, it just kind of singed the carpet a little. I thought okay, and I walked to my next class. I stomped it out because, you know, I didn’t want anything to burn up or anything too bad.

Jack gave two reasons for setting the fire, “Other students were bugging me to do something with the lighter” (not specifically light the carpet but to make a blow torch) and:

probably because I was really tired and I just really didn’t care at the time. I just wanted to sleep. There’s no real reasons. It’s just—I don’t know, it’s kind of like a performing monkey; it’s just like, whatever.

He explained that he did not plan to set the carpet on fire but rather just reached into his pocket and leaned down and held the lighter to the carpet “ kinda like an automatic thing.”

The second reason he gave for setting the fire was:

Because I was mad at our teacher because every time I go into that class it just makes me mad. . . . My English teacher did not teach us one thing the entire year.

He expounded on his answer by giving an example of an assignment in English class:

We had to do a report about watching the movie Merlin. That’s just ridiculously stupid.

It was just like an absolutely terrible movie that didn’t have anything to do with anything. It wasn’t based on reality, facts or anything like that. And we were spending time taking reports on it and getting grades for it. You know it could be something that actually would mean something in the future, you know.

When asked what would make his English class better, he said, “Shakespeare stuff or anything like that. Something that’s relevant to anything.” Jack explained that he took the lighter to school because it’s: “fun to play with. It’s fun to do that little flicking thing.” When asked if he would ever set another fire, he replied: “Naw, cause I’d hate to have to deal with my mom and
dad, more particularly my mom.” He explained his mom, “Freaked out and just started yelling constantly saying I’m going to boot camp. . . . Pretty much just non-stop yelling.” When asked what the fire department could do to keep students from setting school fires, Jack stated, “I’ve never seen any fire prevention or anything at any of my schools.” He felt the fire department should bring fire safety classes to the high schools and teach the kids: “You know, what could happen, what, you know, trouble you get in, stuff like that.”

After I interviewed Jack, I interviewed Jack’s father. He corroborated Jack’s school experiences, discipline record, and the school firesetting incident. He stated that the firesetting behavior was not characteristic of something Jack would do, and was not sure why this happened. He also offered that Jack does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.

Shania

I just wanted to light a match. It looks all wiggly and stuff

On June 7, 2005, Shania, an 11 year-old Hispanic female, was interviewed at Glendale Fire Station 158 regarding her school firesetting incident. Shania stated that she moved from Texas to Arizona with her older brother and younger sister to live with her grandparents. At the time of the school firesetting incident, Shania was in the fifth grade at a public elementary school, maintained a 4.0 GPA, and did not participate in any extracurricular school activities. Shania stated that she liked school because, “I like to learn, ‘cause I like the teachers that are there because they are nice.”

Even though Shania likes school, she has had several school behavior problems in the past school year once for hitting a student during the current semester, subsequently for fighting
with a girl at the beginning of May. She was also caught kissing boys, spreading Play Dough on the classroom walls, hitting other students, and fighting with other girls. She has never been expelled from school but has received an in-school suspension for fighting.

Shania’s grandparents confirmed Shania’s school behavior problems, stating that Shania’s poor behavior started about two to three months after school started when her teacher placed her in a group of “trouble-making” students to try to straighten them out. Instead, she was “sucked” into the trouble-making group and began to cause problems at school.

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information from the school administrator, Shania asked the teacher if she could wash her hands. She then went to the sink in the back of the classroom with matches she had brought from home and began lighting and staring at the lit matches. When she was finished staring at the matches, she then placed them down the drain. There was no damage to the sink or drain. The discipline she received for this firesetting incident was a three-day, out-of-school suspension and mandatory attendance at the PFD YFS Program.

Shania stated the following occurred on the day of her school firesetting incident:

I found matches at home and then took them to school. And then when I took them to school like in the afternoon, I went to the sink and lit one and blew it out and then lit two more and blew them out and then I went to my desk. And then my teacher smelled the stuff and checked if I had matches.

When asked why she lit the matches, she responded, “I just wanted to light a match.” She related that she likes to watch fire because “it looks all wiggly and stuff.” Shania refused to give any more information as to why she lit the matches in the classroom.
After Shania refused to answer further questions about the fire incident in the classroom, she was asked if she wanted to continue this interview. She replied that she did want to continue with the interview. She was then asked if she would ever light matches again or set a fire. She responded, “No, because it is wrong. Because I know I will get in even more trouble.” When asked what the fire department could do to help other students so they won’t light fires in school, she suggested, “They could have the principal check their pockets before they go into the classroom.”

In the interview with Shania’s grandparents, her grandmother informed me that she thought Shania took the matches to school and lit them to get attention, whether negative or positive, from the teacher and students. The grandparents reported that Shania fights with other students and is a chronic liar. However, Shania’s grandmother did corroborate what Shania had said about her school experiences, academic and school behavior record and school firesetting incident. The grandmother further stated that Shania does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability; however, Texas Child Protective Services removed Shania and her siblings from her mother’s custody because of neglect and physical abuse by her mother’s boyfriend. Texas Child Protective Services gave custody of Shania and her siblings to her grandparents.

Randy

They said that if I don’t light the trashcan on fire I’m a wuss
and we’ll have to jump you after school

On June 17, 2005, Randy, a 13-year-old White male, was interviewed at Phoenix Fire Station 58 about his school fire. Randy said that he lives with his father, stepmother, and sister and that his biological mother just got out of prison. Randy stated that he has lived in Arizona
his entire life. At the time of the fire, Randy was in the seventh grade at a public junior high school, maintained a 3.8 GPA, was on the student council, and played baseball. Randy stated that he liked school, “Because it’s fun, because I see all my friends there and I learn stuff. I learn new stuff and it’s just fun. I enjoy learning.” Randy said that he had never been in trouble at school, suspended or expelled prior to the firesetting incident. Randy’s father confirmed his school discipline record.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form, information received from the school administrator, and a letter from the school principal, Randy was referred to the school office for bringing matches to school and lighting them during a school field trip. When he returned from the field trip he lit a match in the boy’s restroom and threw it in the garbage can causing a fire. The fire burned a soap dispenser and garbage can. There was no dollar amount given for the damage done to the bathroom. The discipline Randy received for the school fire was a disciplinary hearing before the school governing board, a 10-day out-of-school suspension, and mandatory attendance at the YFS Program.

Randy explained that prior to his school fire, he had never set a fire and had only played with a lighter a couple of times by flicking it, “I just flick them to look at the flame.” Randy acknowledged that fire was “cool to look at until I got into trouble for this fire.” He stated that on the day of the fire he had brought matches to school “because I wanted to show my friends because there was a half-naked lady on there.” He was asked to clarify this statement and he said that while on vacation his father got books of matches with a half-naked lady on the matchbook covers. Randy stated the following occurred on the day of the fire:

Well, me and my friends were like messing around and I was, I had these matches from
my dad so I came to school with them. And, I lit one and it burned my finger so I threw it in the air and it landed in the trash can because I was right next to the trash can, so the trash can lit on fire.

After returning from a school field trip he went to the boy’s bathroom and lit a match that burned his finger. After burning his finger he dropped the match into the garbage can. He said that the reason he lit the match in the bathroom and placed it in the garbage can was “a peer pressure kind of thing. . . . They [friends] said that if I don’t light the trash can on fire I’m a wuss and we’ll have to jump you after school.” He stated that seven of his school friends were waiting outside the bathroom holding the door shut so he could not get out until he lit the match and started the fire.

When asked if he would set another fire, Randy replied, “No, because I know the consequences and since I’ve seen the videos of what it can do to you, I don’t ever plan on doing it again.” When asked if there was any other reason he replied, “I would not light a match because I wouldn’t want to get burned like the kids on the video and get scrubbed down or pay money to buildings that were lit on fire.” When asked what the fire department could do to keep other students from setting fires Randy responded, “Just like have people go to school and show them videos of what happens to kids or what happened to the officer that one time.” He later clarified that the officer he referred to was Phoenix Police Officer Jason Schecterle, who was severely burned when his patrol car was rear-ended by a speeding taxicab and exploded into flames.

After the interview with Randy, Randy’s father was interviewed and corroborated what Randy told me in the interview. He also said that Randy had been under some recent stress;
Randy’s grandmother recently passed away, his biological mother was just released from prison, and Randy had not been getting along with his stepmother. He also stated that Randy does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.

*Alexi*

*Um, I think it looks—it’s something new, how it turns black and shrivels up. I just find it fascinating*

On July 9, 2005, Alexi, a 15-year-old Phillipino male, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building regarding his fire. He said that he lives with his dad, mom, and sister. At the time of the firesetting incident, Alexi was in the ninth grade at a public high school, maintained a 2.0 GPA, and was not involved in extracurricular school activities. When asked if he liked school, he responded:

  Nope, it isn’t fun. The only reason I don’t ditch is because I need to be there to have a successful life. . . . Some teachers are ignorant, so I don’t go to class. Teachers do pointless things. . . . School itself is learning something that I don’t like or not too interested in myself. So I don’t exactly agree with it and I don’t enjoy it. But I do go and I know I have to learn stuff.

Even though Alexi does not like school, he has never gotten into trouble at school nor has ever been suspended or expelled.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and police contact information, Alexi was walking home from school and lit a dried bush on fire with a lighter that he carried with him. The bush fire caused a grass fire and the fire department was called to extinguish the blaze. The discipline he received for this fire was mandatory attendance at the YFS Program and
punishment by his parents. He was not arrested for the fire and except for the burned grass, there was no other damage done.

When asked about his previous firesetting history, Alexi said that he had set between 8 and 15 fires and that the reason he sets fires is because “I find them entertaining.” He also said that he frequently carries a lighter with him. When asked to expound on his firesetting incidents he explained, “I guess if you’re using a chemical and it makes an explosion, kinda like how kids buy those little snapper things or just being reckless is kinda fun sometimes.” When asked why he frequently carries a lighter he replied, “Stupid little fire tricks. Curling your hand into a ball and filling it with gas and lighting it. . . . I find it very entertaining. Fire just—it looks cool.” When asked if he did fire tricks at school he reported, “Yeah before school, while on campus, before you go through the gates where all the teachers and all the people are.”

When asked to explain his school firesetting incident, Alexi said that on the last day of school, he was walking home, saw a dry bush, and lit it on fire. When asked why he set the fire he responded:

I think it looks—it’s something new, how it turns black and it shrivels up. I just find it fascinating. If you set something that is plastic on fire, the chemicals in it keep the flame but it still melts; unlike some other substances, they just burn and they shrivel up or something or catch fire like gasoline if there is enough of it. There were different causes and effects of stuff like that.

When asked if he would ever set another fire, Alexi said, “Unless I take up smoking, no. I wouldn’t want to take the risk of getting arrested or being burned alive.” When asked what the fire department could do to keep other kids from setting school fires, he replied:

The only thing I could think of is the only reason I have to walk to and from school,
because the school refused to give me a bus pass. So, um, that kind of gives some kids time to think and do whatever they want. And over the year it just kinda grew to the same thing over and over and doing different things now and then. I see a lot of kids doing drugs, smoking cigarettes, you know cigars, to and from. Some kids skateboard, some kids ride their bike, so it’s not that long a way. Some kids just listen to music, some kids are doing random things that don’t seem like you would normally do.

He also stated, “Unless you could somehow make sure kids don’t get a hold of lighters, I don’t think there is much else you can do.”

After the interview with Alexi, his mother was interviewed and corroborated Alexi’s school experiences, discipline record and the firesetting incident. She also said that Alexi loves music and is in a garage band. She finished by saying that Alexi does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.

_Cory_

_I was just bored because the bus was running late_

On September 10, 2005, Cory, a 13-year-old White female, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building. Cory stated that her parents were divorced and that she lives with her mother and younger sister. At the time of the school fire Cory was in the eighth grade at a public middle school, maintained a 2.5 GPA and was not involved in any extracurricular school activities. Cory said that she has had numerous school behavior problems, “I was caught swearing at a teacher and arguing with teachers, and I had a lighter on the school campus.” She stated that she has received in-school suspensions. However, has never received an out-of-school-suspension or been expelled from school prior to the school fire. When asked
why she got in trouble for carrying a lighter on campus, she stated, “I used it to smoke cigarettes
and marijuana.” When asked if she had started previous fires, she reported, ”I was banned from
the park near my home for lighting a Circle K cup on fire and also setting twigs on fire, just out
of boredom.” When asked if she likes or dislikes school, Cory stated that she both likes and
dislikes school, “I like school because we get to see our friends and stuff, but I don’t like school
because of having to concentrate and learn and all that.” When asked about her concentration
problems, Cory stated that she used to have problems concentrating but not anymore “now I’m
on Prozac and stuff so I am not as depressed as I used to be.”

According to the School Fire Referral Form and information received from the school
administrator, Cory was at the school bus stop where she found and lit a lighter and sprayed
perfume to make a lighter torch. A male student, also at the bus stop, told Cory to spray perfume
on his hand. When she sprayed perfume on his arm, he moved his arm and the flame burned his
forearm causing a second-degree burn. The damage caused by the fire was a second-degree
burn to the forearm of a male student. The student’s parents chose not to file criminal charges
against Cory because, according to the student’s parents, he always gets hurt doing something.
She received a nine-day out-of-school suspension, was suspended from the school bus for the
fall semester, was suspended from eating lunch in the school courtyard, and was required to
attend the YFS Program.

Cory reported that on the day of the school firesetting incident, she found the lighter in a
neighbor’s yard while walking to the school bus stop, not at the school bus stop as the
administrator said. She went on to say, while at the school bus stop, the following occurred:

I was playing with the lighter, setting leaves on fire and stuff and then I asked, “Who has
a perfume bottle so I can do a blow torch and set more leaves on fire?” My friend E.
gave me her little tin can of perfume and then I kept asking this kid T if I could set his
hand on fire, “Just spray it with perfume and then light it with the lighter.” And he said I
could. So I went to go do it but instead of just lighting it with a lighter, I did the
blowtorch and he moved his hand and put his arm in the way and then I burned his arm.
When we got on the bus, he was complaining about it hurting, and I felt bad so I took
him up to the school office and told them what happened.

When asked why she set the other student on fire, she initially stated, “Because he moved.” But
upon further clarification she said, “I was making a blowtorch because I was bored and the bus
was running late.” When asked how she felt after she burned him, she responded, “I felt really
bad, but he said that I could do it.”

When asked if she would set another fire, Cory explained, “Probably not. It was a really
stupid decision and I’m tired of getting in trouble.” When asked what the fire department could
do to keep other students from setting school fires, she replied, “Just teach them when they are
younger and haven’t experienced any of this.” When asked to clarify her statement, she stated,
“Just tell them the dangers of fires and stuff.”

After Cory was interviewed, I spent some time talking with her mother who confirmed
Cory’s statements. She added that in the past Cory has disrespected her teachers and wanted to
quit school. Cory’s mother also stated that Cory smokes cigarettes, in the past has smoked
marijuana, suffers from clinical depression, but does not suffer from any learning disabilities.
Ryan

I didn’t want to get jumped after school or shot up

On October 8, 2005, Ryan, a 17-year-old White male, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building regarding his school fire. During the interview, Ryan related that he lives with his father and stepmother; that his two older sisters live on their own; and that his two brothers live with his mother. At the time of the school fire, Ryan was in the eleventh grade at a public high school, maintained a 2.0 GPA, and was involved in ROTC and the school’s drill team.

When asked if he liked school he replied, “Yeah, because the teachers, they help me and all, but they don’t keep me on the same stuff and they let me work at my own rate.” Ryan explained that he liked this school, but not the one he had previously attended because “the teachers, they thought I was retarded so, even if I completed that section of math or whatever type of work I was doing and I passed it, they still kept me on it. They still kept me on the same work.” Ryan stated that he had not been in trouble at this school prior to the school fire, but had been suspended for three days at his previous school for getting angry.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and information from his probation officer, Ryan set a locker on fire in the boy’s locker room with a match he found on his way to school. The probation officer went on to say that Ryan dropped the match into the locker vent causing approximately $3,000 worth of damage to the school locker room and $175.00 worth of damage to the contents of the locker. Ryan’s discipline included being arrested and charged with Reckless Burning, suspension from school for two weeks, mandatory attendance at the YFS Program, and pay restitution for the locker contents and damages to the locker room.
When asked about previous firesetting incidents, Ryan replied:

Just once before this thing, out in the desert just messing around. I had some old stuff I wanted to get rid of, so I took a lighter and some flammable spray liquid out in the desert where there was no dead plants or anything. . . . I just brought the stuff I needed to get rid of so, and then I just put that old junk on the ground and then sprayed it and then lit it and watched it burn. After it was done, after it was fully burnt up, I put it out.

When asked about the school fire, Ryan stated:

Well, I was on my way to weight training from, I think it was my fourth hour class, and I was on my way to weight training and somebody came up to me and he told me to—they told me they had a beef, or they had problems with another guy that was in weight training. And they told me to burn his locker or they were going to jump me after school. And they told me if I tell, I get worse, I get a worse beating, or something. Get shot up or something like that.

At this time clarification was required as to whether there was one or more persons telling Ryan to set the fire. He replied that there was just one and:

Then the music started playing, so that you get to class. And he just ran off. And then I went—I started running to my class and that was on my mind, what he said, I was thinking about it. So I didn’t know what to do and all I had on my mind was being, trying not to be late for class, and trying to get through the class with no problems with teachers. And so as soon as I usually get dressed out, finished getting dressed out later than everybody cuz I gotta put my stuff away. And so on the way to school I found a book of matches; it was nearly empty, so there were just about four matches in there. I lit one, when everybody was out. And I shook it out and I thought it was out, so but it was
still smoking, so I threw it in the locker and then didn’t check it before I went to the weight room. It was the locker that the guy that came up to me and told me to do it, had a problem with.

When asked if he knew the student who told him to set the fire, he stated that he did not know this student’s name but that he belonged to the ABC gang. When asked if other students get beat or shot, he said, “Most of the time. Where I’m from is a rough part of town.”

When Ryan was asked if he would ever set another fire, he replied, “No, cuz my age, I’m almost 18. I’m gonna be 18 in February, so when I’m 18, if I do that, I’ll probably end up in the adult prison.” When asked what the fire department could do to keep students from setting school fires, he replied, “Set up a program at the school. Show them videos and tell them what the consequences are.”

After the interview with Ryan, his father was interviewed and corroborated everything Ryan said. Ryan’s father also stated that Ryan suffers from a personality disorder, has been on psychiatric medication since he was 6 years old, is considered emotionally disabled, has a learning disability, and attends special education classes. He also said that Ryan likes the school he is attending and has not had any school behavior problems at this school prior to the school fire.

_Amanda_

_I don’t really think there was a reason. I think I was just trying to do a trick_

On November 5, 2005, Amanda, a 12-year-old White female, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building. She said that she lives with her mom,
brother and sister. At the time of the fire Amanda was in the seventh grade at a public middle school, maintained a 3.5 GPA and was involved in the school choir.

When asked if she liked or disliked school, she replied, “Sort of, I like hanging out with my friends.” She also said that “school is too easy and I get bored.” When asked about any school behavior problems, suspensions, or expulsions, Amanda said that she has been sent to the office for talking and suspended for 11 days for possessing alcohol and tobacco on the school campus. Amanda’s mother confirmed her school behavior issues.

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information from a school administrator, Amanda was on the school campus for a school function when she lit door decorations on fire on one of her classroom doors with a lighter she had found while walking to school. Amanda received an 11-day out-of-school suspension, a hearing with the school superintendent, mandatory counseling, mandatory attendance at the YFS Program, and was arrested and referred to the juvenile court. She also had to pay damages estimated between $150.00 and $200.00.

When asked if she had set a fire prior to the school fire, she replied:

Just those little fire tricks. And my mom like found burned matches and burned paper and that. But that’s just from—I used to have a smoking problem and that was just all from my smoking because I used to light matches to light a cigarette and then I’d put it out and I’d use paper to get rid of it and stuff. Just stuff like that. There was one time when we were lighting incense and the whole thing got set on fire. Like the whole pack got set on fire, I started throwing stuff at it to get it out and a bunch of stuff got set on fire, but that was about the only time.
Amanda said that on the day of the school fire she found a lighter while walking to school. She went on to say that while attending a school-sporting event “I decided to walk around the school campus and I was trying to do a lighter trick called ‘The Bible.’” She said that the reason she chose to do the trick near her classroom door was:

Because, I just saw the door, I like looked at it. I was like looking at the door because I think they put it up like wild, so I was looking at it. I saw the space and said, “Oh that’s perfect.” And so I already had the lighter, so just thought maybe I should try it again. Cuz the one time I did do it, I really messed up.

When asked why she chose that particular door she said, “Because it was the only place that had the little thing where I could actually like not get the wind in, so it blocked the wind.” She went on to say that when she tried to do the lighter trick “t got out of control and started the ornament on fire.” When asked what kind of ornament was on the door, she stated, “It was a puffy drug-free tree made out of newspaper.” When asked if she would set another fire, Amanda replied, “No, cuz it’s stupid.” She went on to explain why it was stupid, “Cuz, I got in trouble for something I didn’t mean to do and I’m getting into a lot of trouble for it and like it was just stupid.” When asked what the fire department could do so that other students would not set school fires, she suggested, “I don’t know, maybe get educational programs at school so people can see what will happen before they do it, not afterwards.”

After interviewing Amanda, her mother was interviewed and confirmed what Amanda had said about the school fire, her school behavior issues, and her academic record. She also confirmed that Amanda gets bored very easily at school and does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.
**Omar**

*Um, just boredom or I needed to spark some excitement in myself. You know, not much goes on*

On November 10, 2005, Omar, a 13-year-old White male, was interviewed at Phoenix Fire Battalion 7 regarding his school fire. Omar stated that he lives with his parents and younger brother. At the time of the school fire, Omar was in the eighth grade at a public junior high school, had maintained a 3.1 GPA and was involved in the school’s exploratory and wrestling programs. Omar stated that the only previous school behavior problem he had at this school was for “talking in class and I received an in-school suspension.” He related that the school fire was not in response to getting in trouble for talking in class “because that happened a long time ago.” He also said that he had never had an out-of-school suspension or been expelled from school. When asked if he liked or disliked school, Omar stated that he likes school because “I like being with my peers. I like just being there, it’s something to do. . . . I like knowledge.” He went on to say that he does not like authority. When asked to expound on his dislike of authority, he stated:

> I just don’t like people thinking that they are in charge of you in this kind of country, because they’re not. I don’t like it when somebody thinks they are better than you because they have a little badge. I don’t like somebody thinking they can control you. I don’t like somebody thinking that they can take advantage of you like that.

When asked about his previous firesetting history, Omar stated that his previous firesetting history included only one firesetting incident “when I set a napkin on fire with a lighter in my backyard.”
According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Omar used matches he brought from home to light toilet tissue on fire in the boy’s bathroom at school during the lunch hour. The damage caused by the fire was some ash marks on the floor of the bathroom that were easily removed by washing the floor. The discipline received for the school fire was a 15-day out-of-school suspension and mandatory attendance at the YFS Program.

Omar stated that on the day of the fire, during lunch recess, he went into the boy’s bathroom, and that while in the bathroom stall “it just hit me. I had matches and there was toilet paper; it’s in a porcelain bathroom, you know. . . . I just didn’t really think about it and I lit three sheets of toilet paper on fire.” Omar stated that after the toilet paper sheets burned on the floor, he stomped on them to make sure they were out. He explained that he got the matches from his mother’s utility drawer at home. When asked if he frequently carried matches or lighters to school, he responded; “Oh, no.”

Omar said that on the day of the school fire, he was in his mother’s utility drawer and:

I was looking for a Sharpie and I found it and the matches were about a couple of inches away from the Sharpie. I thought you know, nobody uses the matches, I’m probably never going to need these but just in case you know, I have no idea for what, but I could have them handy. I don’t know why I didn’t think about leaving them in the utility drawer, cuz that’s where I could use them too. But, I guess, I don’t find any comfort from fire. I put them in my front pocket and then went to school.

Omar continued to explain that when he was in the school bathroom:

They were just there, and things just carried on. And I didn’t think, you know its porcelain. I was thinking about why would I do this. I was just you know, I think just a
little boredom sparked in me and I just decided to do it.

He went on to explain that the reason he set the toilet paper on fire was “just boredom or I needed to spark some excitement in myself. You know, not much goes on. I just basically decided, what could go wrong?”

When asked if he would set another fire, Omar replied:

Oh, no. After all this punishment and I saw the fire videos. It’s terrible what happens to those burn victims. It’s unbelievable. Like when they showed the picture of that guy and what he looks like afterwards. There is no comparison. I would never want to do that to myself.

When asked what the fire department could do to keep students from setting school fires, he suggested, “Definitely the fire starter program and my parents, and knowing that it can endanger a firefighter’s life and just all that combined into one.” He went on to say “the burn victims, showing the faces before and after of burn victims.” He also said that having a program in the schools that showed the dangers of fire, burn injuries, and how fires endanger firefighters would be a good idea.

Once Omar’s interview was completed, his mother was interviewed. She corroborated what Omar had said about his school discipline record, school experiences, and school firesetting incident. She also stated that Omar does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability, but does have trouble with challenging authority figures.
Bam

Because I got in a fight with my step-dad, and I was mad

On December 7, 2005, Bam, a 13-year-old Hispanic male, was interviewed at Phoenix Fire Station 24 regarding his school fire incident. Bam stated that he lives with his mother, stepfather, one sister and two brothers. He also stated that when he gets into trouble at school, his mother and stepfather threaten to send him to live with his father. He stated that he does not want to live with his father “because he is always drinking and yells at me a lot.” At the time of the school fire, Bam was in the eighth grade at a public middle school, had maintained a 1.8 GPA, and was involved in intramural sports.

Bam stated that he has never been suspended or expelled from school and his only school behavior problem was “when I was late for class.” Bam stated that he likes school because “I get to see my friends and get to go to math class. . . . I really like doing math for some reason.” He also stated that he liked to play basketball with his friends.

Bam’s previous firesetting history included one incident approximately two years ago when he lit some leaves on fire with a match. Bam stated that he does not smoke cigarettes and does not normally carry matches or lighters to school.

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Bam lit matches he got from a friend and then threw the lit matches under a seat on a school bus full of students. There was no damage done to the floor of the school bus. The discipline Bam received included suspension from the school bus and mandatory attendance at the YFS Program.
Bam stated that on the day of the fire incident he was on the school bus and “I got mad and lit a match . . . because I had gotten into a fight with my step-dad . . . and I was mad.” He went on to say that the fight was because “I got in trouble at school because I wasn’t wearing my ID and had my shirt untucked.” When asked if he felt better when he lit matches, he replied, “I don’t know—No.” When asked if he felt worse after lighting the matches, he reported, “Yeah, because I don’t want to go to my dad’s. They say if I’m bad I have to go to my dad’s.” Bam stated he was not mad or angry at the school bus or anyone on the bus, just at his stepdad.

When asked if he would set another fire, Bam replied, “No, because I don’t want to go to jail or juvy. . . . If I do it again I will probably go—they will probably send me to my dad, . . . and, I don’t want to put anybody else in danger.”

When asked what the fire department could do so other students do not set fires on the school bus or at school, Bam suggested, “Don’t let kids be able to buy lighters or matches at the store. . . . And, check the kids when they are going to school.”

After Bam’s interview was completed, I spent some time talking with Bam’s mother who confirmed what Bam had said about his school behavior and school grades. She also corroborated the information Bam gave about his biological father, who is abusive. She added that Bam acts out at school after he returns from a visit with his father. It should be noted that Bam’s mother stated that she was amazed that Bam agreed to be interviewed and actually spoke during the interview “because he usually doesn’t speak very much.” Bam’s mother said that Bam does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.
We were at the bus stop, I just lit papers and put my hands over it because it was cold. I was just messing around on the bus. I wasn’t trying to burn nobody

On December 15, 2005, Tony, a 12-year-old White male, was interviewed at Phoenix Fire Station 30 about a fire at the school bus stop and also about trying to set a student on fire on the school bus. Tony stated that he lives with his mother, stepfather, sister, and brothers. At the time of the school fire incidents, Tony was in the seventh grade at a public junior high school, had maintained a 2.5 GPA, and was not involved in any extracurricular school activities. Tony stated that he has had numerous school behavior problems that included, “Fighting with other students, bullying other students, and setting a bathroom fire at my previous school.” He stated that he was suspended from school for the bullying incident. Even though Tony has had previous school behavior problems he reports that he likes school. Tony stated that the reason he likes school is because “you get to hang out with your friends and you can go to class and learn stuff.” When asked what he liked to learn, he stated that his favorite subject was science because “we talk about how the earth was formed and we talk about minerals.” Tony stated there was nothing he disliked about school.

When asked if he had set previous fires, Tony said that he had set about 10 fires prior to the school fire. He said that he lit fires in “my backyard, inside the house, to leaves, to a trashcan, and to oleander bushes.” When asked why he sets fires, he responded, “When you light something it hurries up and it just turns black. . . . I just laugh, it’s cool.” He also stated that he normally does not carry lighters or matches and that he does not smoke cigarettes.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Tony was involved in two school fire incidents. The first incident was at
the school bus stop where he lit papers on fire to build a warming fire. The second incident was after he got on the school bus and was caught on the bus video camera trying to light the hair of the student sitting in front of him on fire with a lighter. There was no damage caused by the warming fire. However, part of the school bus seat was slightly melted when he was flicking the lighter at the student. No damage estimate was given for the melted school bus seat. The discipline Tony received was mandatory attendance at the YFS Program, suspension from the school bus until the following semester, and a required search every morning prior to school.

Tony gave the following reasons for setting the fires. The first fire he set at the bus stop was because he was cold, “I was just burning papers and stuff, because I was cold and I just put my hands over it.” When asked if other students get cold at the bus stop, he replied, “No because they always have really, really thick jackets on.” The second incident occurred when he was flicking a lit lighter at the back of another student’s head on the bus. He explained this by saying, “I was just messing around and I wasn’t trying to burn nobody. I was just messing around with it. . . . I was just trying to make her, just jump. I wasn’t trying to burn her or nothing.” He explained that making her jump was a prank and that he liked to play pranks on people.

He gave no other reason for taking the lighter to school other than burning papers to get warm. When asked if he normally took lighters or matches to school, he responded that he did not, but that a lot of other kids did. “Out of 500 students at school about 400 carry lighters because they smoke before and after school and most of them are wanna-be gang members.” When asked if he would ever set another fire Tony replied, “No, because I don’t want to get in more trouble with fire anymore. . . . If I burn them, people will know me as the fire starter trying
to burn people and I don’t want to go to juvy.” When asked what the fire department could do so that other students do not set school fires, he answered, “I think they should be able to talk to the kids and stuff, but then the kids would still do it thinking it was all just a joke.” He also stated that the fire department could search kids every morning in homeroom. “Have them [students] empty their pockets and check their socks.”

After the completion of Tony’s interview, Tony’s stepfather was interviewed and confirmed what Tony had said about his academic and school behavior issues. He also related that Tony was a very angry young man, had been suspended from school for bullying, fighting with others, and setting a school bathroom fire while at another school. He stated that Tony does not have any known mental illness or learning disability, but would like to have him see a psychologist about his anger issues.

Esmerelda

And then she’s like “turn it on,” and I’m like “no” and she’s like “yes,” and she’s like “yes” and I’m like “no,”” and then they were pushing me all the way to the trash can and I turned it on and then left

On March 4, 2006, Esmerelda, a 15-year-old Hispanic female, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building regarding her school fire. Esmerelda stated that she lives with her older brother because both of her parents live in Mexico and she wanted to attend school in the US. At the time of the school fire, Esmerelda was in the eighth grade at a public elementary school, maintained a 2.1 GPA, and had not participated in any extracurricular school activities. She said that she has never been suspended or expelled from school or had any type of school behavior problems. Esmerelda stated that she likes school. When asked why, she replied, “I have fun, I want to learn at school, and I like being at school.” She also explained that
she liked to be with her friends and get to know people. She stated that after high school she wants to go to college and then to law school. According to Esmerelda, she had never set a fire or played with lighters or matches prior the school fire and does not smoke cigarettes.

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Esmerelda lit a trashcan on fire in the girl’s restroom with a lighter she had in her coat pocket. The damage caused by the fire was a melted plastic trashcan. Esmerelda’s fire caused the trashcan to be unusable and the cost to replace it was approximately $20.00. The discipline Esmerelda received was quite extensive: a nine-day out-of-school suspension, a 10-day in-school suspension, lunch- and after-school detention for the entire school year, participation on the school work detail, ineligibility to participate in her eighth grade graduation ceremony and attendance at the YFS Program.

Esmerelda related the following happenings on the day of the fire:

Well, those girls, they ditched class and some other girl, she got expelled. When they ditched class, I asked for permission to go to the restroom and the teacher let me go. I had this jacket and it had a lighter in there. I didn’t actually wear the jacket, I just put it on, and then I had the lighter. So the girls new I had a lighter and then I went to the restroom. When I went to the restroom the girls were right there. So like they said, oh, let’s turn it on. I’m like no and one girl is like yes. I said no. She said, let me borrow your lighter, I’m like no. I went back to class. The bell rang and they called me again, I went. They had a trashcan full of paper, toilet paper and she’s like turn it on and I’m like no. She’s like yes. She’s all pushing me. She’s like yes and I’m like no and then she pushed me and then I turned it on.
When asked to explain why she set the fire, Esmerelda gave two reasons for setting the fire. The first reason was that some other girls bullied her into setting the fire:

I went to the bathroom and she told me, “Let me see your lighter,” and I’m like “no.” I went back to class. After class they sent this girl to call me. I went back to the bathroom. They were telling me, “Turn it on, turn it on,” talking at the same time. I was like “no.” She was like “yes.” “Turn it on.” They were pushing me all the way to the trashcan. Then I turned it on, and then we left. The bell rang—I mean the fire alarm started.

When asked what the term “turn it on” meant, she stated that English was not her first language and the term “turn it on” in the Hispanic culture refers to lighting the lighter and starting a fire. The other reason Esmerelda gave for setting the fire was that, “I was trying to be smart,” in living up to the girl’s dare, so she would fit in with the girls:

I think I want to bring attention with the girls. I wanted to bring attention from everybody. . . . It was like, oh, see these girls; I told them I was going to do it. She said like, “No, you are not going to do it.” . . . Like daring you to do that and you do it, and no you won’t, and I will, and I did.

When asked if she would ever set another fire, Esmerelda replied, “No, because I think bad things could happen. There’s a lot of kids . . . they could get hurt.” She went on to explain what would keep her from setting another fire, “Like what they did to me. I have court. I have to go to these classes, and I got grounded.” When asked about the fire department role in preventing students from setting school fires, she stated:

Go and sometimes teach and talk with us about fires and stuff like that. . . . We used to have that information when I was in sixth grade, but not like in eighth grade. We just have fire alarms and we just go out to the playground.
Upon completion of the interview with Esmerelda, I spoke with her brother who confirmed what Esmerelda had said about her academic and school behavior information, and the circumstances surrounding the school fire. He also stated that it was very unlike Esmerelda to get into trouble at school because she really likes school. He also stated that she does not suffer from any know mental illness or learning disability.

Daniel

*I was just bored because we only kept telling jokes.*

*We just kept on making the same thing over and over again, so it got boring*

On March 25, 2006, Daniel, a 10-year-old Hispanic male, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building regarding his school fire. Daniel stated that he lives with his mother, her boyfriend and his two-month-old sister. At the time of the fire Daniel was in the fifth grade at a public elementary school, maintained a 2.7 GPA and played on the school basketball team. Daniel stated that he has never had any school behavior problems or been suspended or expelled from school prior to the school fire. When asked about his previous firesetting history he stated that he had not previously set fires other than the fire in his backyard during the week prior to the fire. He said that he set the backyard fire because he thought fire “was cool.” He also stated that he did not normally carry lighters or matches to school and he does not smoke cigarettes. When asked if he liked or disliked school, Daniel stated that he does not like school because:

*They teach the same things over and over again. Like say about two digits, like how you multiply it. We already learned that last year and then they repeat it again. And probably next year they’ll repeat it again and keep repeating it all over again. . . . Sometimes we*
don’t learn anything new, just what we already know.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Daniel set a grass fire on the school playground with matches allegedly given to him by an unknown student. The damage caused by the fire was a burned patch of grass on the school kickball field. The school did not give a monetary damage estimate. Daniel received a nine-day out-of-school suspension and was required to attend the YFS Program.

Daniel related the following events that occurred on the day of the school fire:

Me and my friends were walking around telling jokes. It was Fun Friday and this sixth grader tapped me on the shoulder and gave me matches. I had the matches in my pocket for about five minutes and then I just started to light them and throw them on the ground. It made a little fire on the ground on the kickball field and I put it out with my feet.

He gave the following reasons for setting the school fire, “Because it was probably a weekend and I thought nobody would probably find out and I wanted to see if the fire would spread.” He added, “I was just bored because we only keep on telling jokes. We just kept on making up the same thing over and over so it got boring.”

Daniel stated that before he got into trouble for setting the school kickball field on fire, he thought fire “was cool.” When asked what he meant by “cool,” he said:

Cool probably means, like how it gets bigger and has different colors. It keeps connecting to different parts and it keeps burning and burning and doesn’t go out for a long time. It turns blue and purple.

When asked if he would ever set another fire, Daniel reported, “No, because it is wrong, and if I do it again, I could get arrested.” He suggested the fire department:
Could probably go in and show them the videos and show them what could happen if you mess with matches. And, you could ask them questions and you answer them so that they know what is right from wrong.

Prior to the interview, Daniel’s mother said that she “really wanted” Daniel to participate in this study because she did not understand why he would set a fire. Upon completion of Daniel’s interview, I interviewed Daniel’s mother. She corroborated the information Daniel gave me about his academic and school behavior information and also the information about the school fire. She also stated that she thought Daniel may have set both the fire in her backyard and the school fire because he had not been receiving the same amount of attention since his sister was born about two months ago. She went on to say that his biological father has not been a very good influence on him because he takes Daniel to Mexico to buy fireworks that they then smuggle back across the border. Daniel’s mother also stated that Daniel does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.

Jason

I was really, really bored. I knew it was going to go out, because it was so damp outside. It was just something to entertain myself.

On April 1, 2006, Jason, a 13-year-old White male, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building regarding his school fire. Jason stated that he lives with his mother, her boyfriend and his stepbrother. At the time of the school fire, Jason was in the seventh grade at a public junior high school, maintained a 3.0 GPA and was not involved in any extracurricular school activities. Jason said that he had previously received school detentions.
and been suspended from school for fist fighting with other students. When asked about his previous firesetting history, he stated:

> When I was seven, I didn’t even know what was going to happen and I was with some other friends. We were bored so we went up to the lake, because we lived by a lake. We were playing around with a smoldering barbecue and threw it on top of the table and then the whole table caught on fire.

He stated “no” when asked if this was the only other fire he had set. He said “I like to melt pens and plastic spoons because I get bored and want to see what would happen if I burn them.” He also stated that he normally does not carry lighters or matches with him and does not smoke cigarettes.

Jason stated that he really likes school, he was popular, that he was going out with a college girl, and “all that was cool.” He went on to say, “School is fun because you get to hang out with all your friends and stuff, but some classes are dull and boring.” When asked to explain what he meant by his classes being dull and boring he stated:

> Classes are really dull because the videos they show in there are not updated. They are like, rocks are the best, this is how you find them, blah, blah, blah. The teachers don’t make it exciting, they don’t put the extra spice into it, you know, do goofy stuff. They just sit there and tell you the names of the gems and diamonds and what they were made from, how they’re made.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and Maricopa County Juvenile Probation Referral Form (see Appendix H), Jason set six plastic garbage cans and a dumpster on fire with a lighter at his junior high school. He was criminally charged with Reckless Burning and Arson of an Unoccupied Structure. The damage estimate was approximately $2,000 worth
of damage to the six garbage cans and the recycling dumpster. The discipline Jason received was that he was required to pay $2,000.00 in restitution and a $50.00 probation fee, was given 32 hours of community service work, expelled from school, and required to attend the YFS Program.

Jason gave the following version of his school firesetting incident:

I got there really early. There were literally no kids around. When I was walking to school earlier that week I found a lighter on the street. And, on the way to school, I just started lighting like leaves and stuff. I got to school and I started lighting paper on the benches because I was really bored. And then I went out to see if my friends were there yet on the field. And I walked next to the trashcan. I had lit a piece of paper and threw it in there. And a couple of them, I did a couple of them. There was this huge dumpster that I did and that’s when it went and a few minutes later the fireman came and got me. When asked if he were trying to burn the school down, he said, “No, I like that school. I was just sitting around doing nothing.”

When asked if he was ever going to set another fire, he replied, “No, because of leaving my school, I’m not going there again.” When asked what would keep him from setting another fire, he said, “Knowing the consequences, knowing what’s gonna happen, being expelled and all that other stuff.”

Jason suggested the fire department could “let kids know what’s gonna happen if they get bored and start messing around with stuff. Let them know that they are going to get expelled. Everything is gonna go bad from there.” When asked how the fire department could
do that, he replied, “Have assemblies, show updated videos, give away little cheap prizes if they can answer a question.”

After Jason’s interview, I spoke with his mother who confirmed what Jason reported about his past academic record, school behavior problems and also corroborated the school fire incident. She also stated that Jason suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder but not from any learning disability.

_Raul_

_I was just bored because I was hanging out in the bathroom, to not go to class_

On May 16, 2006, Raul, a 13-year-old Hispanic male, was interviewed at ABC Middle School (pseudonym for actual school name) regarding his school fires. Raul stated that he lives with his mother, father, sister, and niece. At the time of the school fire, Raul was in the eighth grade at a public middle school, maintained a 0.50 GPA, and had not participated in any extracurricular school activities. Raul had numerous school behavior problems, including a prior school fire in California, fighting with other students, being truant from school, skipping classes, swearing at the teacher, talking in class, disrupting other classes, and hitting another student in the back of the leg. He has served previous out-of-school suspensions and lunch- and after-school detentions. Raul stated that he does not like school because “I have to wake up early, wear a uniform, and I don’t like how the teachers treat me.” When asked how the teachers treated him, Raul replied, “They like suspend you for stupid reasons, like for cussing. I was suspended for two days for cussing.”
Raul’s previous firesetting history included setting fires in his backyard, in California where he used to live, and lighting firecrackers. He said that he normally does not carry lighters or matches to school and does not smoke cigarettes.

According to the Youth Firesetter Referral Form and information received from the school administrator, Raul used matches to light toilet paper on fire in three different restrooms at his school while he was skipping classes. He told the school administrator that he brought the matches from his home. The damage caused by the fires were small soot marks on the bathroom floors. Raul was arrested for the fires and charged with criminal damage. He received a ten-day out-of-school suspension and was mandated to attend the YFS Program.

Raul said that on the day of the fires he brought matches from home, decided to skip class, and was “hiding out in a bathroom:”

I had some matches and started burning toilet paper in three bathrooms. I went from bathroom to bathroom lighting toilet paper on fire with the matches. After I lit the toilet paper, I would stomp it out with my foot. The cameras in the school hallways must have caught me leaving the bathrooms after I set the fires.

When asked why he set the fires in the bathrooms, Raul answered, “I was just bored hanging out in the bathroom. I was just bored.” Raul gave no other reason for setting the three bathroom fires.

When asked if he would ever set another fire, Raul responded, “No, because it gets you in a lot of trouble. They take it all serious.” When asked what the fire department could do to keep students from setting school fires, Raul suggested, “Tell them if they’re just playing with fire, they’ll be arrested or something. Fires are serious.”
Raul’s mother was interviewed prior to Raul’s interview because a Spanish-speaking interpreter was needed to converse with her. Through the interpreter, Raul’s mother offered the same information that Raul gave about his academic and school behavior profiles and suspension history. She also stated that something heavy fell on his head when he was younger and since that incident, he has exhibited strange behaviors. She related that at the time of the head injury he saw a doctor but no tests were conducted to confirm damage to his head. She stated that Raul does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.

Brett

*I just saw the trash can there and thought it would be cool to light it on fire. I thought if I lit it on fire I probably won’t get caught for it, so why not? And then I did it and I got caught for it*

On May 17, 2006, Brett, a 14-year-old White male, was interviewed at Phoenix Fire Station 31 regarding his school fire. Brett stated that he lives with his parents and brother. At the time of the school fire, Brett was in the ninth grade at a public high school, maintained a 3.0 GPA and played on the freshman football team. The only prior school behavior problem Brett reported was an incident during junior high when he threw a smoke bomb in the bathroom. He received a two-day out-of-school suspension for the smoke-bomb incident. He has never had a school behavior problem at his high school.

When asked if he normally carried matches or lighters with him, he explained, “It’s normal for kids to carry lighters. Between 700 and 1,000 students at my high school carry lighters.” He stated that they carry lighters “not because they smoke, but because it is a cool thing to do.” When asked if he smokes, Brett replied, “no.” Brett likes school because “you are
there with your friends all day, it’s kinda fun. . . . The teachers are a lot cooler than they are in junior high. Some of the teachers are actually funny.” Brett explained:

In junior high, they just give you your work and make you do it. In high school some teachers give you your work and then you can talk the rest of the period. You just do your homework at home or wherever. There’s a couple of teachers that you don’t get any homework from and they just teach you and then you just get section reviews in class, which is really cool. You can chew gum here and that sort of stuff. It’s just fun all around.

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information received from a school administrator, Brett went into a boy’s restroom and lit a fire with a lighter given to him by another student. There was no damage caused by the fire except to the trash in the trashcan. The discipline Brett received for the school fire was a five-day out-of-school suspension, inability to make up missed schoolwork, and mandatory attendance at the PFD YFS Program.

Brett explained the firesetting incident:

We got out of 6th period, which is right after lunch. I went to the bathroom and had a lighter. I saw a trash can in there and I just kinda thought it would be cool to light it on fire. Just because, I guess, no real thought behind it. And, then I went to my next period class after lighting the fire. About half-way through my class an Aide came and got me and took me to the office.

When Brett was asked if he wanted to burn down the school, he replied, “No, I didn’t even know if it started,” (when referring to the fire). Brett offered the following reason for setting the fire:
I walked in and I just saw the trash can there and thought it would be cool to light it on fire. I thought if I lit it on fire I probably won’t get caught for it, so why not? And then I did it and I got caught for it.

He went on to say that he really did not know why he set the fire, “It was a really stupid idea. It was just an idea.” He added that he did not think about the consequences prior to setting the fire. “It was done impulsively.” He stated that after he lit the fire and walked out of the bathroom, he said to himself, “Why did I just do that? There was no point in it.

I was like, there was no real reason to do it, so I felt like, you know, acting like an idiot.”

Brett said that he will not set another fire because:

No because I face expulsion if I do. If I got expelled, I wouldn’t get to go to school with my friends or anything. I probably wouldn’t be able to drive a car. My parents wouldn’t let me have a car or get my license. I wouldn’t be able to really do anything. So I wouldn’t do it.

When asked what would keep him from setting another fire, he replied, “Not being able to do anything.” According to Brett, fire departments should “just [tell them] what it does and that sort of thing. The trouble you can get into and stuff. They probably won’t listen though; it depends on who you talk to.”

Brett’s mother was interviewed at the completion of Brett’s interview. She corroborated Brett’s academic, school behavior, and firesetting history. She also stated that he struggles with his image at school and wants to be considered cool. He really “likes the social aspect of school and any attention given to him by other students.” She also stated that he does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.
On June 3, 2006, Johnny, a 14-year-old White male, was interviewed at the Phoenix Fire Department Administration Building about his school fire. Johnny stated that he lives with his mom, step-dad and younger brother. He also stated that he spends a lot of time with his real father. At the time of the school fire, Johnny was in the eighth grade at a public elementary school, maintained a 2.6 GPA and was not involved in any extracurricular school activities. Johnny stated that he has had one previous school problem. He was suspended for three days because of fighting during the previous school year, “I was being bullied and I fought because of being bullied.” Johnny said that the reason he took the lighter to school was because he wanted to fit in with all his friends who carry a lighter. “It’s cool to carry a lighter and I play with it by flicking the flint wheel.” Johnny does not smoke and neither do any of his friends. He stated that he has never set a fire prior to the school fire. When asked if he liked school, Johnny replied, “It’s okay for the most part. The work is easy and I get to hang out with my friends and all that.”

According to the School Firesetter Referral Form and information received from a school administrator, Johnny set fire to grass on the school playground with a lighter he got from another student. (However, Johnny stated that he got the lighter from his home not from another student and his parents confirmed this fact.) The only damage caused by the fire was a burn mark on the grass. Johnny received a three-day out of school suspension, and was required to see a school psychologist and to attend the PFD YFS Program.

Johnny stated that on the day of the fire:
My dad was playing on my computer and a lighter fell out of his pocket and he just forgot about it. I found it and put it in my pocket and went to school. At lunch recess, I scooped up dry grass in my hand and just took the lighter and lit it.

When asked why he brought the lighter to school and set the grass on fire, Johnny explained, “Just to be cool and fit in with my friends. Just to be cool.” When asked to explain what it meant to be cool he replied: “Just being a stunt-type person. Like sort of like doing a stunt that nobody else would do. Like something that people think, that’s impossible. ... Fascinated by something they couldn’t do, but that person did.” He said that was the only reason he lit the fire.

When Johnny was asked if he would ever set another school fire, he responded:

No, because this was a bad experience for me and my parents. The fact of what could have happened if I had actually let it go on its own, I could have set the whole field on fire. I could have set myself on fire.

He went on to say, the fire department could offer “classes at school. Explain the stuff that can happen, show videos of what can happen.”

After Johnny’s interview was completed, I met with Johnny’s mother, father, and stepfather. They corroborated Johnny’s academic and school behavior records and his firesetting history. Johnny’s mother also explained that Johnny has been bullied, which included fighting and name-calling. She said that he really wants to fit in at school and believes the school fire was an attempt to fit in. Johnny does not suffer from any known mental illness or learning disability.
Data Presentation: Research Questions

Now that the reader has been introduced to the 17 school firesetter informants, the following data is presented to address each of the four research questions. Quantitative data is presented in both a summary narrative and table format and qualitative data is presented in a summary narrative and matrix format.

Research Question One

What are the Academic, School Behavior, and Mental Health Profiles of Students Who Set School Fires?

Research Question 1 asked the student to report on his or her academic, school behavior and mental health background, extracurricular school activity participation, and the firesetter informant’s like or dislike of school. Parent and guardian interviews were used in data triangulation to ensure validity. It should be noted that reports from the students, parents and guardians and information received from the school administration did not differ.

Responses to Research Question 1 are significant in light of previous research on school firesetters. Lewis and Yarnell (1951) reported school firesetters were motivated by hatred, revenge, and the desire to destroy the school building. They also reported school firesetters’ school behavior and schoolwork were poor at best, firesetters showed dull or borderline intelligence, and all were diagnosed with special learning disabilities. Wooden and Berkey (1984) found that school firesetters were troubled students who set school fires after a teacher or school administrator had punished them. Meade (1998) and Hall (2006) speculated as to the motives of school firesetters, but conducted no empirical research.
Subquestion 1a: *What is the mean age of school firesetter informants?*

The mean age of the 17 students was 13.30 years with a variance of 3.09 and a standard deviation of 1.76. The age range was from 10 to 17 years old, and the most frequently occurring age was 13 years old. Six students (35%) were 13 years old at the time of their school fire.

Table 10

*Ages of School Firesetter Informants (N = 17)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid Ages</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
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<td>12.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3 students</td>
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<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2 students</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>77.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>2 students</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>88.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Mean Age =13.30 years; Variance = 3.09; SD = 1.76

Subquestion 1b: *What is the mean grade point average (GPA) of the school firesetter informants?*

The mean GPA of the students was 2.65 with a variance of 0.69 and a standard deviation of 0.83. The grade point averages ranged from a low of 0.50 to a high of 4.0 on a 4.0 grading scale and the most frequently occurring grade point average was a 3.0 GPA, with 4 students.
(23%) reporting a GPA of 3.0. Table 11 gives a visual description of the results of Sub question 1b.

Table 11

*School Firesetter Informants’ Grade Point Averages (N = 17)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid GPAs</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2 students</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2 students</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1 student</td>
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<td>47.0</td>
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<td>2.7</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4 students</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1 student</td>
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<td>88.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1 student</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Mean GPA = 2.65 years; Variance = 69; *SD* = .83
Subquestion 1c: *In what extracurricular activities do school firesetter informants report being involved in?*

Nine students (53%) reported being involved in extracurricular school activities. Those activities included band, basketball, chorus, drill team, drum line, exploratory club, football, intramural sports, ROTC, Student Council, and wrestling. Three of the students reported being involved in a combination of two of the extracurricular school activities.

Sub question 1d: *Do the school firesetter informants report having school behavior problems prior to starting the school fire? If so, what types of problems?*

Eleven students (65%) reported having school behavior problems prior to their school fire. Seven students reported multiple infractions, with one student reporting five school behavior infractions and another reporting three school behavior infractions. The other five reported getting into trouble for two school behavior infractions (see Table 12).
Table 12

*School Firesetter Informants’ Prior School Behavior Problems (n = 11)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School behavior problems</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possession of a lighter on school campus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession of alcohol and tobacco on school campus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swearing at a teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not following directions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying other students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late to class</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking in class</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking back to the teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting or throwing things at other students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subquestion 1e: *What type of school suspension or expulsion history has the school firesetter informant experienced prior to the school fire.*

Eleven students (65%) reported never having been suspended or expelled from any school they had ever attended. 6 students (35%) reported being suspended or expelled from school prior to their school fire. Those students who reported being suspended or expelled from school reported the following reasons for the suspension or expulsion (see Table 13).
Subquestion 1f: What mental health issues do the school firesetter informants report prior to the school fire incident?

Thirteen students’ parents or guardians (77%) reported that their child had not been diagnosed with a mental illness or learning disability prior to their child’s school fire. Four parents or guardians (23%) reported their children having a mental health diagnosis and/or learning disability prior to their school fire. Table 14 gives a visual description of those diagnosis.
Table 14

_Mental Health Diagnosis and Learning Disabilities Reported by School Firesetter Informants (n = 17)_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Mental Health Diagnosis or Learning Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>No mental health diagnosis or learning disability identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Clinical depression/recovering alcoholic and drug addict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Learning disability, emotionally disabled, mildly mentally retarded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subquestion 1g: *How does the school firesetter informant talk about his or her relationship to school?*

13 students (76%) reported that they liked school. Of those students who said they liked school; 11 students (85%) reported they liked school because they liked being with their friends, 5 students (38%) said they liked to learn, 3 students (23%) reported that they have fun at school, 3 students (23%) said they liked school because they liked schoolwork, and 3 students (23%) reported they liked school because they liked their teachers. It should be noted that 3 students gave three different reasons for liking school, 6 students gave two reasons as to why they liked school, and 4 students gave one reason why they liked school. One student said that she both liked and disliked school and gave reasons for both. Table 15 is organized by the themes
identified for liking school. Under each theme heading are the quotes from each school firesetter informant. The rows shaded in gray are students who did not give reasons for liking school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Likes being with friends</th>
<th>Likes learning</th>
<th>Have fun</th>
<th>School Work</th>
<th>Likes the teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bob</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Because of math and science.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shania</td>
<td>I want to learn.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I like the teachers because they are nice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Randy</td>
<td>It’s fun because I see all of my friends there.</td>
<td>I learn new stuff. I enjoy learning.</td>
<td>It’s just fun.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alexi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cory</td>
<td>I like school because we get to see friends and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ryan</td>
<td>When you are in school but not in class, you can hang around with your brothers and all that.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>My teachers, they help me and all, but don’t keep me on the same stuff and they let me work at my own rate.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Amanda</td>
<td>I like hanging out with my friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Omar</td>
<td>I like being with my peers, you know, my friends.</td>
<td>I like just being there, something to do. I like knowledge.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Bam</td>
<td>I get to see my friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I get to go to math class.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likes being with friends</td>
<td>Likes learning</td>
<td>Have fun</td>
<td>School work</td>
<td>Likes the teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tony</td>
<td>You get to hang with your friends. And, while you are switching classes you can talk with other people.</td>
<td>You can go to class and learn stuff.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Esmeralda</td>
<td>I want to be with my friends. I want to know people.</td>
<td>I want to learn. I like being at school.</td>
<td>I have fun.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Daniel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jason</td>
<td>It’s fun because you get to hang out with your friends and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Raul</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Brett</td>
<td>You are there with your friends all day.</td>
<td>It’s kind of fun.</td>
<td></td>
<td>The teachers are a lot cooler than they are in junior high. Some of the teachers are actually funny.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Johnny</td>
<td>I get to hang out with my friends and all that.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The work is easy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Six students (35%) reported they disliked school. Two students (33%) said they did not like school, because schools were ranked low in Arizona and the students were taught irrelevant things (one of these student firesetter informants gave two reasons that fell into this category). Two students (33%) reported they did not like school because the teachers taught the same things over and over again. One student (17%) said that he did not like school because of how he was treated by his teachers and school administrators. One student (17%) explained that she did not like school because she had to concentrate and learn. One student (17%) reported he did not like school because he had to wear a school uniform. It should be noted that two of the students gave two reasons why they did not like school and four students reported only one reason why they did not like school. One student responded that she both liked and disliked school. Table 16 presents the student responses organized by themes.
Table 16

*School Firesetter Informants’ Reasons for Not Liking School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Teach the same things</th>
<th>Does not like how he or she is treated</th>
<th>Concentration</th>
<th>Uniforms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Jack</td>
<td>They talk about something that is totally irrelevant. It just makes you think it’s a waste of time. In English class we will talk about and do a report on the movie <em>Merlin</em>, that’s just ridiculously stupid. It is a terrible movie that didn’t have anything to do with anything. It wasn’t based on reality, facts, or anything like that, and we were spending time taking reports on it and getting grades for it. You know, it could be something that would mean something in the future. Something that’s relevant to anything, Shakespeare stuff or anything like that. I just really don’t like it at all in this state. This state is ranked pretty low.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alexi</td>
<td>School itself is learning something that I don’t like or am not too interested in. So, I don’t agree with it and I don’t enjoy it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cory</td>
<td>I don’t like school because of having to concentrate and learn and all that. I’m on Prozac and stuff so now I’m not as depressed as I used to be.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Amanda</td>
<td>It’s too easy and I get bored.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not like education/ranked low and irrelevant</td>
<td>Teach the same things</td>
<td>Does not like how he or she is treated</td>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>Uniforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Daniel</td>
<td>They teach the same things over and over again. Like say two digits, how you multiply it, we already learned that last year and then they repeat it again. Sometimes we don’t learn anything new, just what we already know.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Raul</td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t like the way the teachers treat me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I have to wear a uniform.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Research Question Two

What reasons do students give for setting school fires?

Subquestion 2a: How does the school firesetter informant explain the circumstances surrounding his or her school fire? This question was used during the interview to probe for additional information regarding the school fire.

Subquestion 2b: (What is the main reason the student gives for setting the school fire?) and Subquestion 2c: (What other reason(s) does the student give for the school fire?) were combined during the interviews because very few students were found to provide secondary reasons for their school fires.

The students gave a total of 28 reasons for setting their school fires. Shania gave four reasons why she set the school fire, Omar gave three reasons why he set the school fire, six students gave two reasons, and nine students gave one reason for setting their school fire. These 28 responses were coded and analyzed. The following eight themes were identified as motivations for these students’ school fires. Six students (35%) reported that their school fires were simply a form of entertainment. Five students (29%) identified boredom as the motivator. Four students (23%) revealed that either external or internal peer group pressures were the cause for their school fires. Three students (18%) asserted that their school fires were “just an idea.” Three students (18%) offered no reason for their school fires. Three students (18%) revealed that they set their fires just to see the fire burn. Two students (12%) said that they were angry at someone. One student reported being angry at his teacher, and the other student reported he was angry at his step-dad. Finally, one student (6%) reported that his fire was a warming fire at the school bus stop because his hands were cold. In Table 17, the eight themes are listed as motive
categories. Each category includes quotes from the students. An asterisk has been placed next to Shania’s two responses because her answers fit into two categories.
Table 17

School Firesetter Informants’ Reasons for Setting School Fires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Boredom</th>
<th>Peer group identity</th>
<th>Just an idea</th>
<th>To see fire burn</th>
<th>No reason</th>
<th>Mad at teacher or parent</th>
<th>Warming fire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bob</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I just wanted to see what it would do.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t know, probably because I was really tired and I just really didn’t care at the time.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Probably because I was mad at our teacher because every time I go into that class, it just makes me mad. My English teacher did not teach us one thing the entire year.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shania</td>
<td>I like the way fire looks; it looks all wiggly and stuff.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I just wanted to light a match*****</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Randy</td>
<td>External: They said that if I don’t light the trashcan on fire I’m a wuss and they will have to jump me after school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I just wanted to light a match*****</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alexi</td>
<td>I find the lighter tricks entertaining. I find it fascinating, how it shrivels up and turns black. Fire just looks cool.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There was no reason why I did this.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cory</td>
<td>I was just bored and the bus was late</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 17 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
<th>Boredom</th>
<th>Peer group identity</th>
<th>Just an idea</th>
<th>To see fire burn</th>
<th>No reason</th>
<th>Mad at teacher or parent</th>
<th>Warming fire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Ryan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External: He told me to burn the kid’s locker or he was going to jump me after school. He told me that if I tell, I get worse. I get a worse beating – or something – get shot up or something like that.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Amanda</td>
<td>I think I was just trying to do a lighter trick.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t really think there was a reason. I think I was just trying to do a lighter trick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Omar</td>
<td>Just either boredom or I needed to spark some excitement in myself – You know, not much goes on.</td>
<td></td>
<td>It was just either boredom or I needed to spark some excitement in myself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>You know, I just really didn’t think about it and I lit three sheets of toilet paper. It was just so impulsive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>Peer group</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Just an idea</td>
<td>To see fire burn</td>
<td>No reason</td>
<td>Mad at teacher or parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Bam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I got mad and lit a match. I had gotten into a fight with my step dad because I got into trouble at school from not having my ID and having my shirt tucked in,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tony</td>
<td>I was just trying to make her jump. I was just messing around and I wasn’t trying to burn anybody. I was just messing around with it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was just burning papers and stuff in the alley at the bus stop because some of us were cold and I wanted to warm my hands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 17 (cont.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entertainment</strong></td>
<td><strong>Boredom</strong></td>
<td>Peer group</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Just an idea</td>
<td>To see fire</td>
<td>Warming</td>
<td>Mad at teacher or parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Esmerelda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External: She’s like, turn it on and I said no, and then they started pushing me all the way to the garbage can. They were calling me a scaredy cat and this and that. Internal: I was trying to be smart. I wanted to bring attention to myself with those girls. Like they dared me to do it and I said I would and I did.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Daniel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was just bored because my friends just kept telling the same jokes, the same thing over and over again. They walked ahead and I grabbed some dried grass and lit it in my hand</td>
<td></td>
<td>Just to see if the fire would spread. It was really windy outside. You know, fire is cool, it gets bigger and bigger and turns different colors and keeps connecting to different part and keeps burning and burning and doesn’t go out for a long time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. Jason  
   Entertainment: It was just something to entertain myself.  
   Boredom: I was really, really bored and I knew it wasn’t even going to do anything because it was damp outside. I was just sitting around doing nothing.  
   Peer group identity: Just an idea  
   To see fire burn: No reason  
   Mad at teacher or parent: Warming fire

15. Raul  
   Entertainment:  
   Boredom: I was just bored because I was just hanging out in the bathroom so as not to go to class  
   Peer group identity:  
   To see fire burn:  
   Mad at teacher or parent:  
   Warming fire:  

16. Brett  
   Entertainment:  
   Boredom:  
   Peer group identity:  
   To see fire burn: It was just an idea. I probably won’t get caught, so why not?  
   Mad at teacher or parent:  
   Warming fire:  

17. Johnny  
   Entertainment:  
   Boredom:  
   Peer group identity: Internal: I just wanted to be cool and fit in with my friends.  
   To see fire burn:  
   Mad at teacher or parent:  
   Warming fire:  

*Table 17 (cont.)*
A correlational analysis of motive categories, demographic and social characteristics (age, gender, GPA, and extracurricular activities) was conducted to determine the correlation of motives, demographic and social variables. Two correlations were found: Four of the 5 students who reported “boredom” as the motive for their school fires, were 13 years of age and four of the 5 students who reported “boredom” as their motivation were male.

Research Question 3

*What do student firesetter informants say may prevent them and other students from setting future school fires?*

The students offered 19 recommendations as to why they would not set a future school fire. Sixteen students (94%) offered one suggestion and one student offered three suggestions. Fourteen students (82%) said that they would not set another school fire because it would get them into trouble. Three students (18%) said having to deal with their parents’ or guardians’ wrath would be enough to keep them from setting another school fire. Two students (12%) reported that they would not set another school fire because they did not want to put others in danger. The themes and individual responses are displayed in Table 18.
Table 18

School Firesetter Informants’ Reasons for Not Setting Fires Again

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don’t want to get into trouble</th>
<th>Parents and family</th>
<th>Put anyone else in danger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bob</td>
<td>I don’t want to get in trouble or go to jail.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jack</td>
<td></td>
<td>I would hate to have to deal with my mom and dad—more particularly my mom.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shania</td>
<td>I know it’s wrong and I will get in even more trouble.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Randy</td>
<td>I know the consequences and since I have seen the videos of what it can do, I don’t ever plan on doing it again.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alexi</td>
<td>I wouldn’t want to take the risk of getting arrested or being burned alive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cory</td>
<td>It was a really stupid decision and I’m tired of getting in trouble.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ryan</td>
<td>My age, I’m almost 18, so when I am 18, if I do it I will probably end up in adult prison.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Amanda</td>
<td>It was stupid and I got in trouble for something I didn’t mean to do. I’m getting into a lot of trouble for it and it was just stupid.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Omar</td>
<td>After all of this punishment and the fire videos, it’s terrible what happens to the burn victims. I never want to do that to myself.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Bam</td>
<td>Because I don’t want to go to jail or juvy.</td>
<td>Going to my dad’s. If I do it again, I will probably go, they will probably send me to my dad’s.</td>
<td>I don’t want to put anybody else in danger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tony</td>
<td>I don’t want to get in more trouble with fire anymore.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 18 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don’t want to get into trouble</th>
<th>Parents and family</th>
<th>Put anyone else in danger</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Esmeralda</td>
<td>It was wrong and if I do it again, I could be arrested.</td>
<td>I think bad things could happen. There’s a lot of kids, they could get hurt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Daniel</td>
<td>Leaving my school, I’m not going there again. I’m going to another good school and the only reason I’m going to it was because they did not find out soon enough that I did this or I wouldn’t be there.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jason</td>
<td>I face expulsion if I did. If I got expelled, I wouldn’t get to go to school with my friends or anything. I probably wouldn’t be able to drive a car. My parents wouldn’t let me have a car or a license. I wouldn’t be able to do anything, so I wouldn’t do it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Raul</td>
<td>It gets you in a lot of trouble; they take it all serious.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Brett</td>
<td>This was a bad experience for me and my parents. The fact of what could have happened if I had actually let it go, I could have set the whole field on fire. I could have set myself on fire.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Johnny</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked what fire departments and schools could do to keep other students from setting school fires, 12 students (71%) recommended that fire departments give presentations in schools. Three students (18%) suggested student searches. Two students (12%) said that access to lighters and matches should be denied to all persons under 18 years of age. One student (6%) suggested that all students be given bus passes to avoid idle time going to and from school. Two students had 2 suggestions to offer regarding fire department presentations in schools. The reader can find the themes identified by the students in Table 19.
### Table 19
**School Firesetter Informants' Suggestions to Prevent Other Students From Setting Fires**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Give presentations in the schools</th>
<th>Search students at school</th>
<th>Prohibit lighters and matches</th>
<th>School bus passes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bob</td>
<td>Have firefighters or fire captains show them jail cells and say you are going to be there if you do it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Jack</td>
<td>Well, I have never seen any fire prevention or anything at any of my schools. So probably, like they have DARE that comes to the elementary schools, but they never have fire things. Show us what could happen and all of the trouble you could get into and stuff like that.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shania</td>
<td></td>
<td>They could make sure that no one has anything they are not supposed to have. Have the principal check their pockets before they go into the classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Randy</td>
<td>Have people go to school and show them videos of what happens to kids or what happened to that office that one time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alexi</td>
<td></td>
<td>Somehow make sure kids don’t get a hold of lighters. I don’t think there is much you can do.</td>
<td>The only thing I can think of is the only reason I have—I have to walk to and from school because the school refuses to give me a bus pass. So that kind of gives some kids time to think and do whatever they want.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give presentations in the schools</td>
<td>Search students at school</td>
<td>Prohibit lighters and matches</td>
<td>School bus passes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cory</td>
<td>Teach them when they are younger and haven’t experienced any of this yet. Tell them the dangers of fire and stuff. I just never really paid attention, I was concentrating on the free stuff they gave away.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Ryan</td>
<td>Set up a program at the school. Show them videos and tell them what the consequences are.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Amanda</td>
<td>Tons of things. The burn victims, showing the faces of the burn victims before and after. I think the burn victims is the number one thing that you should put in the schools, because I know it changes somebody like me. I’m kind of stubborn and impulsive. If someone like me could change like that, it would do wonders for people in school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Bam</td>
<td>Check the kids when they are going to school.</td>
<td>Don’t let them buy lighters or matches at the store.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tony</td>
<td>In homeroom, have them empty their pockets and look in the tops of their shoes and socks.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Esmeralda</td>
<td>Go and teach and talk with us about fire and stuff like that—like what to do if you see a fire.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Daniel</td>
<td>You could probably go in and show them the videos that you showed us and show them what could happen if they mess with matches. You could probably ask them questions and have them answer so they know what is right from wrong.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give presentations in the schools</td>
<td>Search students at school</td>
<td>Prohibit lighters and matches</td>
<td>School bus passes</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Jason</td>
<td>Let the kids know what is going to happen if they just get bored and start messing around. Have assemblies and make the assemblies fun. Show updated videos, give away little cheap prizes if they can answer a question.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Raul</td>
<td>Tell the students that if they are playing with fire, they will get arrested or something. Fires are serious.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Brett</td>
<td>You can tell the students all this stuff, what it does and that sort of thing, the trouble you can get into, stuff like that. They probably won’t listen though.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Johnny</td>
<td>You could do classes at the school. Explain stuff that can happen, show some of those videos.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 4

How do the findings of the motivations of school firesetters compare with previous research on the motivations of firesetters in general?

In this study, 8 different motive typologies were identified. Table 20 defines each typology.

Table 20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Entertainment</td>
<td>The student firesetter informant wanted to entertain himself or herself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Boredom</td>
<td>The student firesetter was bored and had access to either matches or a lighter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Peer group identity</td>
<td>The student firesetter informant either felt external or internal pressures to set the school fire. The external pressures revolved around other students pressuring them to set school fires. The internal pressure felt by the school firesetter informants was to “fit in” with a particular group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Just an idea</td>
<td>The student firesetter informants reported that when they remembered they had matches or a lighter they just thought lighting it and then lit it without much aforethought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 To see fire burn</td>
<td>The student firesetter informants reported they liked to watch fire burn and wanted to see what it would do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 No Reason</td>
<td>The student firesetter informants reported that there was no real reason why they set the fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Mad at a teacher or parent</td>
<td>The student firesetter informants reported they were mad at either a teacher or parent and that is why they set the fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Warming fire</td>
<td>The student firesetter informant reported that he set a warming fire to warm his hands while waiting for the school bus.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings of this study were compared with both US- and non-US-based research. As first reviewed in Chapter 2, Fineman, Brudo, and Brudo (1979) identified three main themes or typologies of juvenile firesetters: curious, troubled, and pathological. These
three categories were used as a basis for other US-based researchers to identify and define their juvenile firesetter typologies. Fineman, Brudo, and Brudo’s three main categories are identified below along with other related US-based typologies.

Table 21

*US-Based Research Typologies for Firesetting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>Accidental (Fineman, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experimental (Williams, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play with matches (Wooden &amp; Berkey, 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubled</td>
<td>Attention-seeking (Sakheim &amp; Osborn, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis (Stadolnik, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cry-for-help (Kolko, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delinquent (Fineman, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revenge (Williams, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual excitement (Sakheim &amp; Osborn, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual pleasure (Sakheim &amp; Osborn, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sociocultural (Slavkin, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic (Hall &amp; Brakhage, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would-be-hero (Sakheim &amp; Osborn, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathological</td>
<td>Cognitively impaired (Fineman, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disordered coping (Williams, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severely disturbed (Slavkin, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thought disordered (Williams, 2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The non-US-based research show fundamental differences in the way juvenile firesetters are perceived. Table 22 shows the different juvenile firesetter categories identified by four non-US-based studies. It should be noted that the categories for each study are listed in alphabetical order, not in the order of frequency. The typologies with
an asterisk are common themes that were identified between the current study and the non-US based research.

Table 22

*Non-US- Based Research Typologies for Firesetting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime concealment</td>
<td>Boredom*</td>
<td>Anger*</td>
<td>Boredom*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial/accidental</td>
<td>Destroy something</td>
<td>Attention seeking*</td>
<td>Destroy something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fascination*</td>
<td>See fire burn*</td>
<td>Boredom*</td>
<td>To get heat*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer group pressure*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Destroy something</td>
<td>To get chase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fun*</td>
<td>To seem hard*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-injury</td>
<td></td>
<td>See what happens*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings of this study most closely align with those of Terjestam and Ryden (1996), Cotterall (1999), and the EYSIP (2004). This is evidenced by the following common typologies: anger or being mad, attention seeking (peer group identity), boredom, fun, peer group pressures, to see fire burn or fascination with fire, to get heat (warming fire), and to seem hard (peer group identity). When compared to the US-based research, the categories identified in this study seem to align only with the curious/experimental, crisis/cry-for-help and delinquent categories. Table 23 shows a side-by-side comparison of the US-based, the non-US-based and the findings of this study.
Table 23

**US-, Non-US-, and Boberg - Based Research Typologies for Firesetting**

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curious</strong></td>
<td>Curious</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>To see fire burn</td>
<td>Attention seeking</td>
<td>Destroy things</td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>To destroy something</td>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td>To get chase</td>
<td>Just an idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play-with-matches</td>
<td>Fascination</td>
<td>For fun</td>
<td>To get heat</td>
<td>Mad at someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To see what will happen</td>
<td>To seem hard</td>
<td>No reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To destroy something</td>
<td>Peer group identity</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To see fire burn</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Warming fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Troubled</strong></td>
<td>Attention seeking</td>
<td>Peer group Pressure</td>
<td>To see what will happen</td>
<td>To seem hard</td>
<td>No reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crisis</td>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>To destroy something</td>
<td>To get heat</td>
<td>Mad at someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delinquent</td>
<td>Self-injury</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No reason</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peer group identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual excitement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To see fire burn</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual pleasure</td>
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<td>Warming fire</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sociocultural</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would-be-hero</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pathological</strong></td>
<td>Cognitively impaired</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disordered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peer group identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>coping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To see fire burn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Severely disturbed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Warming fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thought disordered</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>disordered</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Summary**

The purpose of Chapter 4 was to introduce the 17 school firesetters and their self-reports on the motivations for their school fires. Chapter 4 opened with an introduction to the purpose of the study and presented the study’s findings through individual case studies. Whenever possible, students’ voices were privileged. Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated, “Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate” (p. 1).
The second section of Chapter 4 presented findings organized by research questions. Research Question 4 compared the motivations found in this study to US-based and non-US-based research.

Chapter 5 presents a summary of this study, conclusions, recommendations for future practice and research, and concludes with study implications.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is not always possible to know what one has learned, or when the dawning will arrive. You will continue to shift, sift, to shake out and to double back. The synthesis that finally occurs can be in the most unexpected place and the most unexpected time. My charge ... is to be alert to the dawnings.

VIRGINIA B. SMITH
(In Catherine Dibbles Favorite Research Quotes, 2006, p. 2)

Introduction

This study was an exploratory case study of the self-reported motivations of students who set school fires. The questions that guided this study explored the academic, school behavior, and mental health profiles of school firesetters, the motives behind their school fires, their ideas about strategies to keep students from setting school fires, and a comparison of the findings of this study with previous research on the motives of youth firesetters. Seventeen students, ages 10 through 17, who set school fires in the Phoenix, Arizona area, between April 1, 2005 and May 31, 2006, were interviewed for this study. Chapter 5 is the culmination of the study and includes the following sections: the chapter introduction, study summary, a summary of the findings and conclusions, study recommendations that include recommendations for future practice and future research, and study implications.

Study Summary

December 1, 1958 in Chicago, Illinois, a troubled fifth-grade student set fire to a metal-ringed cardboard trashcan in the basement of the Our Lady of the Angels School,
killing 92 students and three nuns. The Our Lady of the Angels school fire and the fact that the Phoenix Fire Department saw an 87% increase in the number of school firesetter referrals from 1999 to 2005 (PFD, 2006) caused me to wonder; are all students who set school fires troubled students like the boy in the Our Lady of the Angels School fire? What motivates a student to set a school fire? These unanswered questions became the catalyst for the development of my doctoral dissertation topic; _An Exploratory Case Study of the Self-Reported Motivations of Students Who Set School Fires._

Chapter 2 the review of literature, introduced the significance of fire and its’ many uses, the history of pyromania, arson, firesetting, and the literature as it relates to the motives and typologies of juvenile firesetters. The final section of Chapter 2 discussed the existing literature on the motivations of school firesetters. In a comprehensive review of the literature on the motives of school firesetters, only two actual studies were identified; Drs. Lewis and Yarnell (1951) and Wooden and Berkey (1984). Drs Lewis and Yarnell (1951) reported that the 61 child firesetters who had either set fires in churches or schools (no differentiation between church or school was given) all had low levels of intelligence and learning disabilities. Lewis and Yarnell identified the motives for the school fires as hatred, revenge and the desire to destroy the school building.

Wooden and Berkey (1984) found that the motives behind the school fires their school firesetter informants set, were revenge or the disruption of school activities. Wooden and Berkey also found that most of the school firesetters were labeled as school troublemakers who had poor academic achievement and set their fires after being punished by a teacher or school administrator.
Both the Lewis and Yarnell (1951) and the Wood and Berkey (1984) studies corroborate the school behavior of the boy in the Our Lady of the Angels School fire.

The research problems that guided this study looked at several different factors. First, what are the academic, school behavior and mental health profiles of students who set school fires? Second, what reasons do students give for setting school fires? Third, what do school firesetters say may prevent them and other students from setting future school fires? Finally, how do the findings of the motivations of school firesetters compare with previous research on the motivation of firesetters in general?

To determine if today’s school firesetters are considered trouble-making students with low intelligence who set fires in an attempt to destroy the school building, an exploratory case study was conducted. The case study (Yin, 2003) research method allowed me to use in-depth interviews for data gathering. The methodological approach taken in this study was broadly qualitative, although some elements of quantitative research were used when appropriate. The study sample included 17 school firesetters who were referred to the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with each of the 17 school firesetter informants and his or her parent or guardian. Youth firesetter referral forms and academic records were utilized to gain information about the school firesetter and the school firesetting incident. Qualitative information obtained in the interviews was coded, categorized and analyzed using analytic induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (Wiersma, 1995).
The reader should be reminded that when comparing the findings of this research with previous research on juvenile firesetting, differences in sample populations could be responsible for shaping the differences in the research results. In this study, 17 students, referred by their school administrators for setting school fires were interviewed. In Lewis and Yarnell’s research, the 61 school firesetters were referred from various sources including mental health referrals from Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital in New York City, other in- and out-patient treatment centers and juvenile detention centers. Wooden and Berkey’s research centered around 536 youth who had set fires on school property over a 7 year period, all of whom were reported to have emotional disturbances.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

*Research Question 1. What are the academic, school behavior, and mental health profiles of students who set school fires?*

The case study revealed the following profile of the 17 students who participated in this study; (a) The average age of student firesetters was of 13.30 years; (b) The firesetter informants maintained a 2.67 GPA and 47% reported at least a 3.0 GPA or higher on a 4.0 scale; (c) Fifty-three percent reported being involved in at least one extracurricular school activity; (d) Sixty-five percent reported having school behavior problems prior to their school fire. However, only one of these student’s behavior problems was fire-related and none of the school behavior problems were reported to be the catalyst for the school fires; (e) Sixty-five percent reported that they had never been suspended or expelled from school; (f) Seventy-seven percent had never been diagnosed with a mental illness or learning disability; and (g) Seventy-six percent of the students reported that they liked school.
Finding 1. The average age of school firesetters is 13.30 years old. Children of any age are capable of setting a school fire. However, when looking at the previous research on school firesetters, Lewis and Yarnell (1951) stated that children under the age of ten rarely set school fires and the most frequently occurring group of school firesetters is between 12 and 14 years of age. In Wooden and Berkey’s 1984 report, the median age of their school firesetters was 14 years of age.

Conclusion 1. The findings of this research are consistent with the research findings of Lewis and Yarnell (1951) and Wooden and Berkey (1984) with the average age of school firesetters being between 12 and 14 years of age. It can then be concluded from this study and previous research on school firesetters, that children between the ages of 12 and 14 are more at risk for setting school fires.

Finding 2. Students who set school fires have predominately average to above average levels of academic functioning based on their academic records. Students who set school fires are not necessarily students with dull to low borderline intelligence. In this study, the most frequently occurring GPA for the 17 school firesetter informants was a 3.0 GPA or a B grade average. The average GPA was a 2.65 GPA or C+ to B- grade average and only two school firesetters reported having a GPA below a 2.0 or C average.

Lewis and Yarnell (1951) reported that school firesetters showed a predominately dull or borderline intelligence and all were unable to compete with the other students in their classrooms. Wooden and Berkey (1984) found that school firesetters fell into the delinquent firesetter category and shared such characteristics as aggressive or destructive behavior and poor academic achievement.
The findings of this study suggest that the current group of school firesetters are students with few learning disabilities, and have an average to above average level of academic functioning (as evidenced by their academic standing), quite different from the students identified in the previous research.

**Conclusion 2.** One can then conclude that there is a great discrepancy between the findings of Lewis and Yarnell (1951), Wooden and Berkey (1984) and the findings of this study. It can also be concluded that the level of academic functioning cannot be associated with whether a student will or will not set a school fire.

**Finding 3.** School firesetters may engage in extracurricular school activities. Fifty-three percent of the school firesetter informants reported being involved in extracurricular school activities with two of the firesetter informants reporting that they were involved in two extracurricular activities. The previous research on school firesetters did not address the issue of extracurricular activities with school firesetters. However, it can be assumed that students who dislike school would not be likely to engage in extracurricular school activities.

**Conclusion 3.** Therefore, with the results of this study and the lack of previous research, one can conclude that involvement in or lack of involvement in extracurricular activities is not associated with whether a student will set a school fire.

**Finding 4.** School firesetters are more likely to have had school behavior problems prior to their school fires. Sixty-five percent of the school firesetter informants in this study indicated that they had school behavior problems prior to their school fires. The reported problems ranged in severity, from being late to class to physically fighting with
other students and teachers. However, none of the 17 students said they set their school fire in response to being punished for a previous school behavior issue.

Lewis and Yarnell (1951) reported that the school firesetters’ classroom behavior was poor at best and that the school firesetters also vandalize school property, stole from the teachers and staff, left obscene notes on the teacher’s desk, and mutilated the teachers’ clothing. Wooden and Berkey (1984) stated that school firesetters were trouble-making students who set fires after being punished by teachers or school administrators.

**Conclusion 4.** What can be concluded from this and previous research on school firesetters is that more often than not, school firesetters have had previous school behavior issues that run the gamut of severity, from being late to class to committing crimes against persons or property. However, simply because a student has a school behavior problem does not mean that he or she will set a school fire in retaliation for the school discipline received.

**Finding 5.** A School firesetter is not likely to have a school suspension or expulsion history prior to the school fire. Sixty-five percent of the school firesetter informants reported that they had never been suspended or expelled from any school they had ever attended. Interestingly, none of the school firesetters who had reported being suspended or expelled previously were suspended from school for firesetting, with the exception of Brett who ignited a smoke bomb in the school bathroom when he was in junior high.

There was no previous research identified that addressed the issue of school suspension or expulsion histories of school firesetters.

**Conclusion 5.** Therefore, it can be concluded that a school suspension or expulsion history or lack thereof is not associated with school firesetting.
Finding 6. School firesetters are not likely to suffer from a mental health or learning disability diagnosis. Seventy-seven percent of the student firesetter informants in this study had never been diagnosed with a mental illness or learning disability. Interestingly, the current study’s findings on mental illness and learning disabilities correspond closely with the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program statistics over the past six years. An average of 22% of all youth firesetter referrals received by the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program were diagnosed with a mental illness and/or learning disability (PFD, 2006). The 22% of firesetters with mental illness or learning disabilities identified in the Phoenix statistics closely resembles the 23% of school firesetters in the current study diagnosed with a mental illness or learning disability.

Lewis and Yarnell (1951) reported all of the school firesetters in their study had special learning disabilities. Wooden and Berkey (1984) found that school-firesetters fell into the delinquent firesetter category and:

- Are strongly influenced by their peers and share such behavioral characteristics as a disruptive home environment, emotional disturbances, sexual immaturity, aggressive or destructive behavior, and poor academic achievement (p. 81).

Conclusion 6. What can be concluded from the current study is that about 23% of student firesetter informants reported suffering from a mental illness or learning disability, a figure which does not correspond with previous research by Lewis and Yarnell (1951) or Wooden and Berkey (1984). Therefore, it can be concluded that the school firesetter informants more closely correspond with the current statistics on mental illness or learning disability diagnoses than they do with the previous research on school
firesetters. It also can be concluded that a mental illness or learning disability is not associated with school firesetting behavior.

Finding 7. School firesetters report that they like school. Thirteen of the seventeen school firesetter informants reported that they liked school and only four school firesetter informants reported that they disliked school. The reasons given for liking school included; likes to be with friends; likes to learn; to have fun; likes schoolwork; and likes the teachers.

Both the Lewis and Yarnell (1951) and Wooden and Berkey (1984) studies reported that all motives for school firesetters were based on revenge, hatred, a dislike of school, to disrupt the classroom, or a desire to destroy the school building. Not one school firesetter informant in the current study reported that the motive for his or her school fire was to destroy the school building or disrupt a classroom.

Conclusion 7. It can then be concluded that the majority of the current group of school firesetter informants do not have a dislike for school and that their school fires were not directed at burning down the school building or in response to being angry at the school or school staff. These findings do not correspond with the previous research on school firesetting. It can also be concluded that a like or dislike of school is not a precursor to a student setting a school fire.

Research Question 2. What reasons do students give for setting school fires?

The case study revealed that students identified a variety of motives for setting school fires that have been categorized into the following typologies; entertainment; boredom; peer group identity which includes both internal and external pressures; just an
Finding 8. Students set school fires for various reasons. Six of the seventeen school firesetter informants said that they set their school fire for entertainment. Shania, Alexi, Amanda, Omar, Tony, and Jason reported that they liked to perform lighter tricks, watch how fire burns and spark excitement.

Cory, Omar, Daniel, Jason and Raul reported that they set their school fire because they were bored. Their boredom stemmed from the bus being late, being taught the same thing over and over again, not being challenged academically, not having any work to do, and idle time.

Randy, Ryan, Esmerelda, and Johnny reported they set the fires because of internal and/or external peer pressures. Randy, Ryan and Esmerelda reported that they were threatened with bodily harm if they did not set a school fire. The threats ranged from being called names to being beaten or shot. Esmerelda and Johnny set their school fire because they wanted to fit in and be liked by other students. It should be noted that Esmerelda reported both external and internal peer pressure as the catalysts for her school fire.

Shania, Omar and Brett set their school fire because it was just an idea. Omar and Brett said they lit their fire without thinking. Shania set her fire because she wanted to light matches.

Bob, Shania and Daniel set school fires to watch it burn. Bob stated that he wanted to see what the fire would do. Daniel reported that he wanted to see if the fire
would spread because it was windy outside. Shania just wanted to watch the lit matches burn.

Jack, Shania and Amanda reported that they didn’t have a particular reason for their school fires. Jack reported that he was really tired and didn’t care and likened his fire to that of a performing monkey who just does something and doesn’t think about it. Shania and Amanda reported that they just set the fire with no real reason behind doing it.

Jack and Bam reported they were mad at someone immediately before they set their fire. Jack reported that he was mad at his English teacher because she (teacher) didn’t teach him anything the entire school year and he felt like the class was a big waste of time. Bam reported that he was mad at his stepfather because prior to going to school he and his stepfather had gotten into a fight.

Tony said that he set the fire because he was cold and wanted to warm up while waiting for the school bus. He reported that other students don’t get cold because they have nice jackets and he doesn’t own a thick jacket to keep out the cold.

Conclusion 8. It can be concluded that students set school fires for many different reasons that did not include wanting to burn down the school building or hurt students, faculty or staff. These reasons differ significantly from those identified by Lewis and Yarnell (1951) and Wooden and Berkey (1984). Because of the discrepancies between the current research and the previous research on school firesetters, several conclusions can be drawn: First, students use fire as a form of entertainment. The popularity of possessing lighters creates an environment conducive to fires. Accidental fires can occur from a lighter trick gone wrong or the impulsivity of playing with a lighter that was carried to school in a pocket, backpack or purse. Six students reported that their school
fires were based on entertainment. Shania reported, “I like the way fire looks; it looks all wiggly and stuff.” Alexi stated, I find the lighter tricks entertaining. I find it fascinating how it shrivels up and turns black. Fire just looks cool.” Amanda explained, “I was just trying to do a lighter trick.” Omar said, “I needed to spark some excitement in myself – You know, not much goes on.” Tony reported, “I was just trying to make her jump. I was just messing around and I wasn’t trying to burn anybody.” And, Jason revealed, “It was just something to entertain myself.” The students reporting that their school fires were based on entertainment, begs the question; why do students need to be entertained at school? And, are schools not providing the educational engagement students require?

Second, students are bored, not academically challenged and use fire in an attempt to alleviate their boredom. Five students identified boredom as the motive for their school fire. Cory reported, “I was just bored and the bus was late.” Omar stated, “Just either boredom or I needed to spark some excitement in myself.” Daniel explained, “I was just bored because my friends just kept telling the same jokes, the same thing over and over again.” Jason explained, “I was really, really bored and I knew it wasn’t even going to do anything because it was damp outside. I was just sitting around doing nothing.” Raul said, “I was just bored because I was just hanging out in the bathroom so as not to go to class.” The finding of boredom being a catalyst for school fires brings up the question, why are students bored at school? In her research, Falls (2006) found, “A curriculum that presented little challenge was a negative influence on freshman student engagement with learning” (p. 243). Falls (2006) also stated, “Freshmen at MHS, were not engaged in learning, as they found class work to be too easy and a review of prior learning” (p. 243). Ghory and Sinclair (1980) found that if there was not a match between the student’s skill
level and the challenge of the curriculum, the mismatch is likely to influence the students’ interaction with school. In the current research, the mismatch between skill and curriculum might have been the catalyst for the school fires. Milner (2004) states it best:

A common perception is that our schools are doing a poor job in educating many of our young people. Why are our schools failing us? Schools are in some respects like factories, good at taking uniform raw materials and turning out a standardized product. But when the quality of the input becomes highly variable and the number of products that are produced becomes manifold, the routinized procedures of the factories are more problematic (p. 18).

Milner (2004) goes on to explain:

Yet, as with any manufacturing process, the more raw material processed and the more variable the characteristics of that raw material, the more difficult it is to maintain the uniformity and quality of the output (p. 18).

In other words, individual differences in intelligence are not necessarily taken into consideration when curricula are developed. Instead, curricula are developed to educate the masses. If a child is beyond the curriculum and he or she becomes bored, the boredom allows time to engage in undesirable behaviors.

Third, students are peer pressured either externally or internally to set a fire. Pressure by others to set a fire is a form of bullying. Rigby (2002) defines bullying as, “a desire to hurt + a harmful action + a power imbalance + (typically) repetition + an unjust use of power + evident enjoyment by the aggressor and generally a sense of being oppressed on the part of the victim” (pp. 27-30). According to DeVoe et al. (2004), “Bullying can contribute to an environment of fear and intimidation in schools” (p. 20).
Three students reported that they were bullied into setting their school fires. Randy reported, “They said that if I don’t light the trashcan on fire, I’m a wuss and they will have to jump me after school.” Ryan stated, “He told me to burn the kid’s locker or he was going to jump me after school. He told me that if I tell, I get worse. I get a worse beating or something – get shot up or something like that.” Esmerelda added, “She’s like turn it on and I said no, and then they started pushing me to the garbage can. They were calling me scaredy cat and this and that.”

Internal pressure was also deemed a catalyst for two school fires in this study. When a student puts pressure on him or her self to carry a lighter or set a fire to fit in with his or her peers, he or she is experiencing internal peer pressure. According to Eder (1995), “Studies of peer culture in American schools reveal a strong concern with status and social hierarchy” (p. 12). Adolescent researcher Coleman (1961) goes on to report that adolescent students were more concerned with popularity than with academic success. In the current study, two students reported that the motive behind their school fires was the pressure to fit in with their peer groups. Esmerelda stated, “I was trying to be smart. I wanted to bring attention to myself with those girls. Like they dared me to do it and I said I would and I did.” Johnny reported, “I just wanted to be cool and fit in with my friends.”

Fourth, students set school fires on impulse. None of the school firesetters reported that they thought about the consequences of their school fires prior to setting the fires. Failure to consider consequences prior to an act can be considered impulsive. According to the Webster’s Dictionary (Neufeldt, 1988), being impulsive is defined as, “A sudden inclination to act, usually without premeditation” (p. 679). According to
Olmstead (2003), “Mammalian species (including humans) exhibit increased impulsivity, risk-taking and sensation-seeking during adolescence, changes that are associated with maturation of the prefrontal cortex” (p.2). Olmstead’s insight would explain why none of the 17 school firesetters thought about the consequences of their actions prior to their school fires. When asked, Shania reported, “I just wanted to light a match so I did.” Omar offered, “I just really didn’t think about it and lit three sheets of toilet paper. It was just so impulsive.” Brett reported, “It was just an idea. I probably won’t get caught, so why not.”

Fifth, students set fires so that they can watch the flames. Fire is hypnotizing, mesmerizing, relaxing, calming, and warming. Fire is constantly moving and changing. It is common for a child to light things on fire to see what it will do. Children who set fires out of curiosity or experimentation are known as curious firesetters (Fineman, Brudo and Brudo, 1980). The motive behind the curious firesetter is just to see what will happen. Three students reported that they set their school fires because they wanted to see fire burn. Bob explained that he set his fire because, “I just wanted to see what it would do.” Shania reported, “I just wanted to light a match.” Daniel explained:

To see if the fire would spread. It was really windy outside. You know, fire is cool, it gets bigger and bigger and turns different colors. It keeps connecting to different parts and keeps burning and burning and doesn’t go out for a long time.

Sixth, some students set fires for no particular reason. Jack reported, “I don’t know, probably because I was really tired and I just really didn’t care at the time. There is no real reason. It’s just like, I don’t know, it’s kind of like a performing monkey.” Shania revealed, “There was no reason why I did this.” Amanda said, “I don’t really think there
was a reason. I think I was just trying to do a lighter trick.” The idea that students didn’t really have a reason for their school fires generates the idea that impulsivity may have been to blame for the fires. None of the students thought through their actions or the possible consequences prior to their school fires.

Seventh, students set school fires because they are angry with their teacher or parent. After much sole searching, Jack stated, “Probably because I was mad at our teacher because every time I go into that class, it just makes me mad. My English teacher did not teach us one thing the entire year.” Bam reported, “I got mad and lit a match. I had gotten into a fight with my step dad because I got into trouble at school for not having my ID and having my shirt tucked in.” In the literature on school firesetting every researcher identified anger as a catalyst for firesetting. Lewis and Yarnell (1951) stated that children who set fires in schools:

Seem the freest in expressing their hatred against the object of their attack. The superficial reasons offered [for the school fires] included: ‘We didn’t like the looks of the teacher”; “I got a bad report card and thought I’d make a fire and blow it up”; “I was mad because I didn’t pass”; “I was tired of going to school”; or “the teacher picked on me’ ” (p. 300).

Eighth, students set fires at the school bus stop to warm up. Tony reported, “I was just burning papers and stuff in the alley at the bus stop because some of us were cold and I wanted to warm my hands.” In a review of the literature on firesetting, only one study was found that gave warming fires as a motive for firesetting. In the EYSIP report (2004) “to get heat” was an identified firesetter motivation. The report went on to explain that to get heat meant: “The heat a fire provides on cold Edinburgh nights should not be
overlooked. Street workers know just how cold it can get if someone is out on the streets for several hours. [the street workers] are better dressed for the cold than most young people are” (p. 48).

Finding 9. It is a common practice for students to carry lighters to school.

It was found through the in-depth interviews that carrying lighters to school is a popular practice for students, even if the student doesn’t smoke. Fifty-nine percent of the firesetter informants reported that they and other students carried lighters to school. Students carry lighters to school to perform lighter tricks and because it is considered cool. Alexi stated, “I find lighter tricks fascinating – fire just looks cool.” Tony reports, “A lot of them [students] carry lighters with them to school and they stuff them in their shoes.” Tony gave the estimate that, “400 out of 500 students carry lighters to school.” Brett reported, “It is kind of normal to carry lighters, a lot of kids have them at school.” Brett went on to estimate that, “between 700 and 1,000 students at my school carry lighters” and the reason they carry lighters is: “to just have them.” Johnny reported that he carried his lighter to school because he wanted to “be cool and fit in with my friends.” When asked if other students carry lighters to school he responded, “All my friends have one and they play with them.”

Where did the practice of school students carrying lighters come from? Research on the subject of lighters revealed that in 2003, the Zippo Lighter Company’s website, www.zippotricks.com, was dedicated to showing individuals how to perform 555 different lighter tricks (Madslien, 2004). The Zippo website was so detailed, web viewers could download various lighter tricks to their home computers or upload new tricks to the
Zippo website. Any child who could navigate the World Wide Web was able to get to the website and look at and download lighter tricks.

Today the Zippo Lighter Trick website has been removed because of pressure from the National Fire Protection Association, the Consumer Products Safety Commission and various U.S. Senators. Theses organizations and individuals felt that the website encouraged young people to play with fire (Madslien, 2004). However, even though the Zippo Lighter website was closed, a current lighter trick website, www.lightertricks.com contains the same features as the Zippo Lighter Trick website.

Conclusion 9. It can be concluded that school students carry lighters to school to be cool, fit in and perform lighters tricks for entertainment. In this study, 59% of the firesetter informants reported that they carry a lighter with them and so do many other students at their schools. It can also be concluded that carrying lighters to school is a fad just like carrying a wallet on a chain, wearing bell-bottom pants or saddle shoes. The only difference is that carrying a lighter can result in burn injuries, burned property, school suspensions and expulsions.

Research Question 3. What do student firesetters say may prevent them and other students from setting future school fires?

The case study revealed three reasons why the school firesetters would not set another fire; fear of getting into trouble; the reactions of their parents and family; and a concern about placing others in danger. Four additional suggestions were provided to keep students from setting school fires; give fire prevention presentations in schools; search students at school; prohibit youth under the age of 18 from being able to buy lighters and matches; and give all students school bus passes. A complication with the
responses to Research Question 3 was that they were elicited after attendance at the Youth Firesetter Intervention Program. The responses may have been influenced by what the student’s learned in the YFS Program.

Finding 10. Students who have been disciplined for setting a school fire will not set another fire because they do not want to get into trouble, don’t want to deal with parents and family and don’t want to put anyone else in danger. Eighty-two percent of the students said that they would not set another fire because they didn’t want to get into trouble. Bob stated, “I don’t want to get in trouble or go to jail.” Cory explained, “It was really a stupid decision and I’m tired of getting in trouble.” Ryan, who was almost 18 years old said, “My age, I’m almost 18, so when I am 18, if I do it I will probably end up in adult prison.” Amanda revealed, “It was stupid and I got in trouble for something I didn’t mean to do. I’m getting into a lot of trouble for it and it was just stupid.”

Eighteen percent of the students said that they would not set another fire because of how their parent or guardian would react. Jack stated, “I would hate to have to deal with my mom and dad – more particularly my mom.” Bam reported, “Going to my dad’s. If I do it again I will probably have to go, they will send me to my dad’s.” Johnny revealed:

This was a bad experience for me and my parents. The fact of what could have happened if I had actually let it go, I could have set the whole field on fire. I could have set myself on fire.

Twelve percent of the students reported that they would not set another fire because they did not want to put anyone else in danger. Esmerelda reported, “I think bad
things could happen. There’s a lot of kids, they could get hurt.” Bam stated, “I don’t want to put anyone else in danger.”

Conclusion 10. The previous research on school firesetters did not address the student’s perspective on what would keep him or her from setting another fire. Therefore, the results of this research suggest some students will not set future fires because they don’t want to get into trouble, deal with their parents and family or put anyone else in danger.

Finding 11. Giving fire prevention programs in kindergarten through twelfth grade educational institutions, searching students at school, prohibiting youth under the age of 18 from purchasing lighters and matches, and providing every student with a school bus pass will prevent students from setting school fires. Seventy-one percent of the students stated that fire departments need to give fire prevention presentations in schools that include arson and fireworks laws, legal and financial consequences and information about burn injuries, to keep students from setting school fires. All of those topics were discussed in the Youth Firesetter Program the school firesetters attended. The following are examples of what some of the student’s reported. Jack stated:

I have never seen any fire prevention or anything like that in any of my schools. So probably like they have DARE that comes to elementary schools, but the never have fire things. Show us what could happen and all of the trouble you could get into and stuff like that.

Randy reported, “Have people go to school and show them videos of what happens to kids or what happened to that officer that one time.” Omar suggested:

Tons of things. The burn victims, showing the faces of the burn victims before
and after. I think the burn victims is the number one thing that you should put in
the schools, because I know it changes somebody like me. I’m kind of stubborn
and impulsive. If someone like me could change like that, it would do wonders for
people in school.

Eighteen percent of the students believed that students should under go searches
at school to find lighters and matches that may have been brought to school. Shania
stated, “They could make sure that no one has anything they are not supposed to have.
Have the principal check their pockets before they go into the classroom.” Tony
suggested, “In homeroom, have them empty their pockets and look in the tops of their
shoes and socks.” Bam gave the following suggestion, “Check the kids when they are
going to school.”

Twelve percent of the students believed that youth under the age of 18 should not
be able to buy lighters or matches. Alexi suggested, “Somehow make sure kids don’t get
a hold of lighters.” Bam offered: “Don’t let them buy lighters or matches at the store.”

Six percent of the students believed that school bus passes should be given to all
students. Alexi stated:

The only thing I can think of is the only reason I have – I have to walk to and
from school because the school refuses to give me a bus pass. So that kind of
gives some kids time to think and do whatever they want.

**Conclusion 11.** There is no previous research on school firesetter’s suggestions
on how to prevent students set school fires. Therefore, it can be concluded that giving
fire prevention programs in kindergarten through twelfth grade educational institutions,
researching students at school, prohibiting youth under the age of 18 from purchasing lighters and matches, and providing every student with a school bus pass may prevent some students from setting school fires.

*Research Question 4. How do the findings of the motivations of school firesetters compare with previous research on the motivations of firesetters in general?*

This case study revealed eight different motive typologies for school firesetters: entertainment, boredom, peer group identity, just an idea, to see fire burn, no reason, mad at teacher and parent, and to make a warming fire. The list of motives was compared with both US- based and non-US- based motive typologies to determine similarities and differences.

*Finding 12. School firesetter motive typologies more closely align with the motive typologies identified by non-US- based researchers.* Fineman, Brudo and Brudo (1979) identified three juvenile firesetter typologies: curious, troubled and pathological. From these three typologies other US- based researchers identified additional typologies that can be classified under the Fineman, Brudo and Brudo typologies:

1. Curious
   a. Accidental
   b. Experimental
   c. Play-with-matches

2. Troubled
   a. Attention seeking
   b. Crisis
   c. Cry-for-help
   d. Delinquent
   e. Revenge
   f. Sexual excitement
   g. Sexual pleasure
   h. Socio-cultural
   i. Strategic
j. Would-be-hero

3. Pathological
   a. Cognitively impaired
   b. Disordered coping
   c. Severely disturbed
   d. Thought disordered

In a review of the non-US-based research, fundamental differences in the motive typologies were identified. Swaffer and Hollin (1995) identified the following motives: crime concealment, denial or accidental, fascination, peer group pressure, revenge, and self-injury. Terjestam and Ryden (1996) found 3 motives: boredom, to destroy something and to see fire burn. Cotterrall identified 6 motives: anger, attention seeking, boredom, to destroy something, just for fun, and to see what happens. The EYSIP (2004) study identified 5 motive types: boredom, to destroy something, to get heat, to get chase, and to seem hard.

When comparing the findings of the current study to both the US-based and non-US-based research, the research revealed that the results of the current study most closely align with the non-US-based research.

Conclusion 12. The previous research on youth firesetter motive typologies show a vast difference between the US-based and non-US-based motive typologies. The current study was found to most closely align with the non-US-based motive typologies. Therefore, it can be concluded that the motive typologies identified by the 17 students in the current study show more similarities to those youth firesetter respondents in the non-US based studies. It can also be concluded that the students in the current study are not troubled or pathological firesetters but instead, are bored, impulsive, want to fit into a group, and be entertained.
Recommendations for Practice and Research

The issue of school fires and firesetters is one that has been around for almost 100 years, but for the most part, has remained out of the sight of researchers, school administrators, legislators and the public. The reasons for the lack of insight into the issues of school fires and firesetters remain a mystery. It is hoped that through this study, those eyes will be opened and the seriousness of this issue will be understood. The following recommendations for practice are made with the fire service, education system and legislative bodies in mind.

Recommendations for Practice

Recommendation 1. Fire safety and prevention programs should be taught to all kindergarten through 12th grade students in all schools in the United States and include a discussion of the properties of fire, the arson and fireworks laws, legal and financial consequences, burn injuries and fire safety.

Recommendation 2. All US fire departments should provide some type of youth firesetter intervention program in their community that captures youth firesetter and school firesetter statistics to provide a reference as to the youth and school firesetter problem in their community.

Recommendation 3. All US fire departments should provide an aged based youth firesetter intervention program curriculum that includes information on the properties of fire, the arson and fireworks laws, legal and financial consequences, burn injuries and fire safety.
Recommendation 4. Since students between the ages of 12 and 14 appear to be at particular risk, fire prevention programs maybe of particular importance at the middle school level.

Recommendation 5. All fire departments should consider presenting youth firesetter information to school administrators, counselor’s teachers and staff to make them aware of the laws regarding arson and fireworks, the issues surrounding youth and school firesetting and that a youth firesetter intervention program can assist in combating youth firesetting.

Recommendation 6. The US and state governments should consider outlawing the sale of lighters and matches to all persons under the age of 18.

Recommendation 7. All schools in the US should have and follow a written policy forbidding the possession of lighters and matches on school campuses.

Recommendation 8. All school administrators should discipline students who are found to be in possession of lighters or matches and include as part of the discipline, mandatory attendance at a youth firesetter intervention program.

Recommendation 9. All schools should have and follow a written discipline policy outlining the discipline a student shall receive for starting a school fire.

Recommendation 10. All school administrators should discipline students who set a school fire and include as part of the discipline, mandatory attendance at a youth firesetter intervention program.

Recommendation 11. It should be mandatory that all school administrators report school fires to their local police and fire department so that accurate statistics can be maintained.
Recommendations for Future Research

Student set school fire research is an area that has been completely under studied by youth firesetter and other researchers. The following are recommendations for future research. I challenge youth firesetter and other researchers to under take these recommendations as the basis future research projects.

Recommendation 1. Further school firesetter research should be conducted on a state- and country-wide level to determine if the sample of school firesetters in the current study is a representative sample of school firesetters in general.

Recommendation 2. Further research could consider the use of an instrument to develop a psychosocial profile of school firesetters.

Recommendation 3. Further research could consider identifying school firesetter similarities and differences based on age, ethnicity, gender, GPA, the socio-economic status of the school neighborhood, the type of school (e.g. public, charter or parochial), and home and family background.

Recommendation 4. Further research could determine what percentage of non-English speaking children are involved in school firesetting and if the lack of speaking and understanding English or cultural background is a motivator for the setting of school fires.

Recommendation 5. Further research could identify the school firesetters’ attitude, experience and knowledge of the properties of fire, fire safety and arson laws prior to attending a youth firesetter intervention program.

Recommendation 6. Further research could identify to what extent peer pressure and bullying are the motivators behind school fires.
Recommendation 7. Further state- and nation-wide research could be conducted to identify the number of students who carry lighters or matches to school and the reasons why they do so.

Recommendation 8. Further research could be conducted on school district policies regarding the possession of lighters and matches on school campuses to determine if these policies have an effect on the number of school fires.

Recommendation 9. Further research could consider the development of a profiling instrument to be used in the identification of possible school setters before a school fire occurs.

Recommendation 10. Further research could consider comparing and contrasting the number of school fires in schools with and without fire prevention programs to determine the effectiveness of fire prevention programs.

Recommendation 11. Further research could consider identifying the extent of the school fire problem both state- and nation-wide.

Recommendation 12. Further research could consider comparing the school discipline practices of schools where students set school fires with those schools where school fires have not occurred to determine if discipline practices are a deterrent to school fires.

Research Implications

The phenomenon of student set school fires is an area of youth firesetter research that has been completely under studied. The lack of research on this topic is troubling because a fire in a school could be more devastating than a school shooting. The severity
of the fire in the Our Lady of the Angels School and the subsequent deaths of 92 students and 3 nuns provides ample proof.

The intent of this study was to gain insight from the school firesetter as to what motivated him or her to set a school fire in order to develop school firesetter motive typologies. A second intent of this study was to have a written document that would be available to inform school administrators, teachers, the fire service, and community members about the issues that surround school firesetting. The third intent of this study was to assist school administrators, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and parents as to possible precursors of school fires. A fourth intent of this study was to encourage a dialogue and possible partnership between schools and the fire service so that identified school firesetters can get the services needed to stop their school firesetting behavior. The fifth and final intent of this study was to provide a forum for dialogue among current youth firesetter researchers and provide a basis for future school firesetting research. This exploratory case study on the motivations of school firesetters was a first of its kind, breaking ground and setting the stage for future school firesetter research.

The first implication of this study concerns the way we as a society organize time for young people. Children spend a good deal of time in schools. Yet, the 17 young people in this study complained about the lack of academic challenge provided in schools. This study suggests that we revisit school curricula in an attempt to make learning meaningful and challenging for students. Perhaps if Jack was engaged in his English class he would not have set a fire in his classroom.

A second implication concerns the way we understand and deal with adolescents. Many of the school firesetters in this study admitted that they did not foresee the
consequences of their actions. In fact, they suggest that participation in a fire prevention program would both help them understand those consequences and prevent future school fires. Adolescents are not yet adults and we can’t forget that they still require all of the guidance and support we can provide.

A final implication of this study is the fact that most youth firesetter research originates from the field of mental health. We may be too quick to look for some type of psychological trouble as the catalyst for youth firesetting behavior. The voices of the students in this study often contradicted the findings of previous research and suggest a new way of thinking about student firesetters’ relationships to fire. As researchers we are so set on discovering some deep-seated reason for adolescent firesetting behavior that we forget that adolescents are impulsive beings who do things without thinking, just because, to impress their friends, or simply for no reason at all. We need to open our ears, close our mouths and listen to what adolescents have to say. What they have to say is rich with insight concerning their world today. We can assume and speculate why adolescents do what they do, but only the adolescent truly knows why they do what they do.

*It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot, irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.*

*Jacob Bronowski*

*(In The Ascent of Man, 1976, ch. 4)*
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