

The Truth About Arson

By

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Of all the causes of fire, none receives as much attention as arson. Many groups are vocal on the subject, and arson figures prominently in popular fiction. One unfortunate result of all this attention has been the persistence of several myths about arson – myths that distract us from the real patterns and trends in arson and so may interfere with an effective attack on the problem.

Perhaps the most persistent myth about arson is that it's the fastest-growing crime in the United States. In fact, arson isn't growing at all, at least in terms of long-term trends. The downward trend may be seen in all the nationally representative estimates, including NFPA's survey, the national-estimates methods based on the U.S. Fire Administration's (USFA's) National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) and the NFPA survey, the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports estimates, and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) reports on arson forest fires.

The perception that arson is increasing has been put forward by several sources. Among these are insurance-industry spokespersons, who base their conclusions, in part, on insurance industry estimates of the size of the arson problem. However, insurance databases aren't as representative as those cited above, and the methods used to make the estimates aren't as openly documented.

Others base their assertions that arson is rising on their familiarity with local trends. Arson may well be increasing in some communities, but the figures available show that the long-term trend is down, not only overall but also in all regions and in communities of all sizes.

A second persistent myth about arson is that it's hard to solve because it destroys all the evidence. Arson *is* hard to solve. Indeed, the fraction of all arsons solved by arrest ranges from 15 to 20 percent. But this same solution rate applies to all major property crimes, which tend to go unwitnessed.

Furthermore, incendiary and suspicious fires *don't* typically destroy all the evidence. In more than half of all the incendiary and suspicious structure fires that occurred between 1991 and 1995, there was no flame damage outside the room of origin. Incendiary and suspicious fires are more likely than most other fires to spread beyond the room of origin, but the differences in likelihood are small. In 40 percent of incendiary and suspicious structure fires, in fact, there's no flame damage beyond the immediate area of origin. If useful evidence were available, the fires would probably leave some of it untouched.

The real problem is that identifiable evidence is rare in any unwitnessed property crime. But methods that work to increase the solution rates for crimes such as burglary and motor vehicle theft may be effective with arson, as well.

The third most common myth about arson is that it rises during bad economic times, particularly recessions. In hard times, it's not unusual for local fire officials and insurance adjusters in some communities to report apparent jumps in some types of arson. However, the national statistics don't show evidence of a significant link.

ARSON AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Although there was a net increase in arson arrests of 5 percent from 1987 to 1996, arson actually accounts for a very small and declining fraction of the activity of the criminal justice system. In 1996, in fact, arson arrests decreased 7 percent after decreasing 3 percent in 1995, increasing 5 percent in 1994, decreasing 1 percent in 1993, and increasing 2 percent in 1992 and 1991. In 1996, arson arrests made up just 0.12 percent of all arrests and just 0.67 percent of all FBI index crime arrests. Of the eight FBI index crimes, which include murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson, arson nearly always ranks last in number of arrests.

According to FBI statistics, law enforcement agencies have solved, or cleared, between 15 and 19 percent of arson offenses every year since 1980. In 1996, the clearance rate was 16 percent. This rate is much lower than the rate for violent crimes, such as murder, aggravated assault, and rape, but it's on the same order as the clearance rate for other property crimes, such as burglary. Interestingly, the clearance rates for arson, as for all major crimes, tend to be lower in larger cities than they are in smaller cities and rural communities, possibly because people in smaller communities are more likely to know one another, which can make solving a crime easier.

The only alleged perpetrators of 46 percent of all the arson cases cleared in 1996 were under age 18. This is roughly four times the share of the population between the ages of 10 and 17. It's also the highest percentage of juvenile involvement in any FBI index crime.

The percentage of 1996 arson clearances involving only juveniles was highest – 61 percent – for fires involving outdoor trash, brush, and items other than structures and vehicles, and lowest – 25 percent – for fires involving vehicles. The rate for structural arson clearances involving only juveniles was 44 percent.

Juveniles also accounted for 53 percent of those arrested for arson in 1996, the third straight year in which the rate was over 50 percent. Nonetheless, arson arrests of juveniles actually decreased 6 percent in 1996, bucking a recent trend toward more arrests among juveniles that reflects both a rise in juvenile arrests and a drop in adult arrests. From 1987 to 1996, there was a 36 percent net increase in arrests of juveniles for arson and a 17 percent decrease in arrests of adults. In 1996, adult arson arrests decreased by 8 percent.

Not only do juveniles make up a large share of all arson arrests, but further analysis shows just how young many of these offenders are. More than one-third of all persons arrested for arson in 1996 were under 15, and roughly one of every 15 persons arrested was under 10.

MOTIVES, CONVICTIONS, AND SENTENCES

Why do people commit arson? A 1982 USFA report, summarizing the results of several special studies, noted that vandalism and malicious mischief – analogous to what we now describe as juvenile firesetting – and revenge or spite, presumably by adults, were the leading motives cited. Farther back but still significant were pyromania or other mental illness and arson for profit, where profit includes concealment of a crime.

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Editor's Note: *The crime of arson is often used as an all-inclusive term to include juvenile firesetting. It is hoped that by presenting this information about arson, some clarity may be brought to the subject.*