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## Comments on Arson

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Most psychiatrists have little contact with arsonists. Those who work with juvenile delinquents will have seen some adolescent firesetters, often of limited intelligence with schizoid personality or other behavior disorders. On rare occasions the compulsive firesetter, driven sexually, will engage in repetitive events and be found masturbating at the scene of a fire. Vandalism or revenge fires may be directed at schools, public buildings, and employers. Similarly, psychotic firesetters are caught in the throes of their bizarre practices—burning churches or other symbolic institutions. Many criminals show a history of adolescent firesetting. Nonetheless, psychiatrists see few arsonists. It is unclear if the arsonists seen are typical because so few are actually caught. Thus those caught may be singularly incompetent in one way or another.

The psychiatrist interested in arson should have a broad dimensional picture of arson as it exists today, when the influence of political movements, social patterns, and reward systems is much different than was the case not too long ago.

### **Arson as a Crime**

Arson, or the deliberate setting of a fire, is increasingly recognized as a major social problem. Despite severe statutory penalties, it has become an issue of immense magnitude. No longer is it just a psychological curiosity or a juvenile aberration. It is a crime that causes monetary losses of at least one billion dollars a year (a very conservative estimate) and large numbers of deaths and severe bodily injuries. For example, in New York, where about 1600 people a year die by homicide, 300 die in fires. In the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, the recent 60 arson deaths were 50% of the murder rate. Despite the obviousness of the problem, the extent is not known and there are few experts to be found in investigation, mechanisms of firesetting, motivational patterns, economic aspects, and prosecution.

Arson is a crime that is unusual in that the event must be carefully investigated first before one can ascertain whether the occurrence was indeed a crime. Arson is one crime which, if well done, destroys the evidence of its own existence. Despite its roots in antiquity, arson was not of truly major concern to firefighters or police investigators until recently. Firefighters had little sophistication and there were few forensic science specialists to aid investigators from the police or firefighter groups. Often police and firefighters have been engaged in jurisdictional disputes as to who "owns" arson. This conflict is typified in the action of a recent New York mayor who created an Arson Task Force composed of fifty police investigators and no firefighters, to the distress of at least some of the latter.

In rural areas, particularly those with volunteer firemen, there is little investigative capacity. In New Jersey, 85% of firefighters are volunteers. Many firemen in formal

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organizations view themselves as primarily concerned with the mechanical aspects of stopping a fire.

Many jurisdictions, particularly large cities or state investigative agencies, do have specialized squads, whatever their makeup, that have the responsibility for ascertaining whether a fire was set, how, by whom, for whom, and for what reason. Nonetheless, the front line is that of the firefighter who is on the scene first and who must both put out the fire and conserve physical evidence.

### **Nonpsychological Motivational Patterns in Arson**

Arson has been employed in sociopolitical movements and in vast money-making efforts ("fraud fire"). It is occasionally involved in the cover-up of other crimes such as theft or murder. Arson is obviously lucrative, particularly in declining urban areas. There the intermixture of social, political, and economic factors has compounded the situation.

In some areas, arson is so extensive as to be a major element in the social disintegration of vast areas, such as the South Bronx or Bushwick area of Brooklyn. The intensive investigative effort in New York in those areas has reduced the incidence of fires. Yet ponder this. Bushwick has about 8000 buildings. In 1976, there were 1140 fires, and in 1977, 700, with a continuing decline in 1978. In one year there were more than 200 arrests. In the Bushwick section, 12 to 15% of the buildings will produce fires per year. In Boston, more housing is being burned than is being built.

Fire seems to flow with demographic shifts, federal and state policies, insurance availability, minority immigration, changing business conditions, and even accidents such as disruption of electricity.

New York City in particular has shown the effect of a decline in housing stock, deterioration, escalating maintenance and utility costs, and very high insurance rates. Rent control has aggravated the problem of economic nonviability.

So-called fraud fires are also known as "selling the house to the insurance company." The federal government in its usual short-sighted fashion sought to stabilize neighborhoods by encouraging mandatory state-run insurance plans for high risk areas. The result has been a remarkable economic incentive for the commission of arson.

For example, the New York FAIR<sup>2</sup> plan (a state-run program) will provide insurance up to \$400 000 with no prior investigation as to building value. This invitation to overvaluation inevitably leads to fires. One Brooklyn landlord (71 properties) has had fires in 56% of his buildings. Owners are not investigated as to background. In Massachusetts, where the rules are somewhat tighter, conspirators, through a rapid series of transactions, run up the face value of a property. One suggestion is that computerized lists of owners and prior owners be compiled so that multiple participants can be identified.

Areas of arson create a contagion of such motivation. As houses and apartments burn, the adjacent commercial enterprises have a smaller and smaller business base. Store owners with policies that cover not only the building and contents but also business interruption are sorely tempted. Retail establishments are more vulnerable than manufacturing plants that do not depend on neighborhood trade.

Under the Massachusetts FAIR plan, 70% of fires doing more than \$10 000 in damage are considered to be unknown, suspicious, or incendiary in origin. Even after investigation, 60% of these (or 42% of the total) have no cause assigned, reflecting the problems of adequate proof.

In New Jersey, of 58 000 fires, only 8700 were investigated. Of these, one third were determined to be caused by arson. Only 340 or 12% were cleared by arrest.

<sup>2</sup>Fair Access to Insurance Requirements.

### **Welfare Fires**

Not only landlords, businessmen, and property speculators benefit by the torch. New York City provides funding for welfare recipients who are burned out. They receive up to \$2000 to replace lost clothing, furniture, and appliances. In addition, they may receive up to \$600 as a finder's fee for finding new apartments for themselves. Thus someone who is already planning to move and has an available apartment can obtain a \$2600 grant with the judicious use of fire. The police become suspicious when appliances are not found in a burned apartment or when the closets have no metal hangers. (The recipients move out their clothes and other belongings before the fire, not realizing that this may leave some indicia of suspicious circumstances.) At one point, it was estimated that welfare fraud was involved in as many as 15% of fires. After more intense investigation, it is now thought to be 8 to 10%.

### **Minorities, Racism, and Arson**

In the late 1960s, many cities were in flames at the height of the urban protest. One heard the slogan, "Burn, baby, burn." Community arson had received social sanction. Fires were, and still are to a degree, viewed by some racial or political minorities as a way of dissent, destruction of property belonging to "Whitey," and as a means of instant urban renewal. In situations of group riot, the act itself becomes contagious through group approval, the thing to do at the time. The torching of empty buildings (and others) was then blamed on black activist groups or adolescent troublemakers. Perhaps some investigators found this as an easy explanation where concrete evidence was lacking. In both the early racial riots and the recent looting episodes, many have suspected that property owners took advantage of the chaos to provide the torch.

The problem of the socially inspired fire remains. Yet often the victims of the fires have been the inhabitants of the areas where the fires occurred. The poor live in constant fear of fires—of loss of belongings, of threat to life—and have a continuing pervasive anxiety and feeling of helplessness. In some areas, citizens' groups have initiated systems of "neighborhood watch" and have cooperated with police in seeking likely suspects. After all, arson is that rare crime that spreads beyond the control of the perpetrator.

### **Other Economic Aspects**

The insurance aspect of fires is obvious. Overvaluation or carefully designed plans to drive up valuation by multiple purchases bespeak a long-standing plan. Other fires occur when landlords or tenants find themselves in a financial crisis. In almost any residential area, a homeowner may seek the torch when he needs cash or is unable to meet mortgage payments. Homeowners are more likely to be involved in amateurish fires with a greater risk of apprehension than is the case with the large commercial or multitenant fire. The homeowner's assistants are not likely to be professionally sophisticated.

Peculiar behavior patterns before the actual fire have been commonly noted. Landlords would stop deliveries of fuel oil or cut heat or hot water to save money. Buildings would be gutted or vandalized for salvage.

One plan is to have a roof fire that results in a building being vacated. Then the empty building is gutted, followed by total arson destruction. One Newark owner bought a building for \$250 down; a \$10 000 fire followed and then a \$25 000 fire. The building was never occupied.

### **Reporting**

Not only is there no uniform reporting system; arson is also not one of the crimes reported on a national scale. Vast numbers of fires are not reported. The potential for

reporting every fire—building, automobile, grass, or bush—raises a specter of a paperwork flood. The burden on volunteer firemen would be particularly onerous. Accordingly, many fire department personnel object to a thorough reporting system.

In New York City, there are about 55 000 structural or building fires a year. With cars, docks, and other fires, there are probably over 100 000. Even a 20% rate attributable to arson would require 20 000 reports and investigations.

Estimates of arson vary greatly. Disparate sources give impressionistic figures of anywhere from 10 to 75% of fires as arson. While revenge or juvenile fires are thought by many to be the most common, one group of opinions varied in its estimates of profit-motivated arson from 10 to 75%. The same group attributed 12 to 60% to juvenile firesetters. The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration has been more conservative, estimating only 5% of set fires as fraud fires, with the bulk as revenge or vandalism fires.

### **Prosecution of Arson**

Conviction of arson is very difficult. Investigation requires special knowledge; it must be prompt, and proof is difficult to obtain. Even if arson is shown, even greater problems are involved in identifying the individuals involved and proving their participation. Commercial property owners deal with professional firesetters who do the work or farm it out to specialists. The small property owner may attempt the job himself or deal with intermediaries who in turn hire young or juvenile torches. Proving a tie-in with the property owner then becomes quite complex.

The physical evidence aspect of arson is a rapidly developing science. Prosecutors require considerable technical sophistication; the Bronx district attorney now has a special attorney who supervises all such cases.

### **Pyromania**

There do seem to be changing patterns in firesetters. Lewis and Yarnell [1] had estimated that 25 to 40% of male arsonists were compulsive firesetters or pyromaniacs (other causes were 25%, anger or vengeance and 12 to 15%, psychosis). Of course, pyromaniacs were much more likely to be multiple firesetters. Firesetters were young (highest frequency, age 17) and of dull, borderline, or lesser intelligence (70%). Alcoholism was not infrequent; depression and suicide were. Nonetheless, the classical compulsive neurotic firesetter who has been such an intriguing character in the past is seemingly on the decline. Robbins et al [2] comment on the rarity of pyromaniacs in their work at Bellevue. They report that compulsive firesetters "have not been observed here for many years." They postulate that changes in sexual patterns in our culture that allow other outlets for acting out have diminished the frequency of this traditional clinical entity. Similarly, the rate of psychosis and low intelligence would be less today. This perhaps can be related to the factors discussed earlier that have tended to promote the setting of fires.

### **Publicity, the Media, and Arson**

Recently, various lawsuits have raised the issue of the influence of the media on behavior. One defendant in a murder case attempted to attribute his behavior to the influence of television. Subsequently a plaintiff injured by criminal acts in a fashion similar to that portrayed in a television program attempted to attribute causality, if not negligence, to media communication. Regardless of the merit of these contentions, it is clear that mere publicity about ideas or behavior furthers such ideas or behavior. For example, it is accepted axiomatically that the suicide of a prominent person will be followed by a sudden increase in the incidence of suicide. Television, through both drama

and the news, has vividly presented the various dimensions of fire, arson, and social unrest. Therefore one may assume that media exposure about arson may interact with the psychopathology of at least some firesetters.

### Summary

Some comments have been offered as to the current state of arson with particular reference to nonpsychological issues. Awareness of changing arson patterns and the compounding of motivation through social influence must be considered by those who evaluate arsonists. Because of difficulties in obtaining adequate data, general statements about arson must be cautiously made. Psychiatrists need to keep in mind the selectivity involved in the referral system that transmits only selected arsonists for evaluation.

The psychologically driven or psychiatrically aberrant arson does play a role in a significant percentage of set fires. The handling of behaviorally driven arson continues to be an important matter. Nonetheless, those interested in the psychological aspects of arson must increasingly keep in mind the social context of arson and the changing patterns of behavior, some of which relate specifically to government policy. In any event, for the forthcoming years, arson is sure to be a hot issue.

### References

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