Psychodynamics of Arson

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Objectives

• Understand the psychological motives of arson
• Understand arson as it relates to mental illness
• Understand firesetting behavior
Arson

...any malicious burning of a house or personal property of another
Comparison of Rates of Arson per 100,000

USA: FBI Uniform Crime Report
Can Source: Juristat 2004
UK Source: Home Office 2007
Australia Source: Royal Commission 2004
2008 U.S. Statistics

- 1,451,500 Fires
- 62,807 Arsons

= 4.3%
Statistics

- Structures, 43.40%
- Mobile, 28.90%
- Other (Crops, Fences, Timber), 27.70%

“They can be strategic, as in hate crimes or crimes to cover up other crimes, or they can be mere delinquency. But there is no such thing as a friendly arson fire.”

–Bob Khan, Chief-Phoenix Fire Department
Motives for Arson

- Psychopathological factors
- Profit
- Animosity
- Vandalism
- Crime concealment
- Political objectives
Motives for Arson

- Psychopathological factors
  - Profit
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  - Crime concealment
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Psychopathological Factors

- Schizophrenia and other psychosis
- Mental Retardation
- Substance Abuse
- Personality Disorders
- Mood Disorders
- Pyromania
Psychopathological Factors
Psychosis

• Hallucinations

• Delusions

Psychosis

- 8% of male arsonists and 14% of female arsonists had a psychotic diagnosis.
- 22 x increased odds of committing arson.


Non-Psychotic vs. Psychotic

Non-Psychotic
- Motive: Hate
- Target: Family and friends
- More likely to act out of intoxication and anger
- Target: Residential houses

Psychotic
- Motive: Hate-delusional derived
- Target: Community
- Target: Abandoned houses
- Less likely to be involved in insurance fraud

David Berkowitz
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Andre Rison and Lisa “Left-Eye” Lopes
Psychopathological Factors

• Schizophrenia and other psychosis
• **Intellectual Disability**
• Substance Abuse
• Personality Disorders
• Mood Disorders
• Pyromania
Psychopathological Factors
Intellectual Disability

• “Reduced cognitive functions that can render them more impulsive, suggestible or unable to appreciate the consequences of their actions”

Intellectual Disability

• More likely *purely* arsonists

• 17% of recidivist arsonists were ID

Harry Burkhart
Psychopathological Factors

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- Mental Retardation
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- Mood Disorders
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Psychopathological Factors
Substance Use

• Alcohol common in recidivist arsonists

• 61% had co morbid alcohol use

• 68% intoxicated

• Drug dependence increased the odds of arson increase 7-8 x

Mount Joy man charged with arson in Harvey's Main Street BBQ fire

A 28-year-old Mount Joy man has been charged with setting fire to Harvey's Main Street BBQ in July.

Kyle Coon, a former employee at the restaurant, allegedly started a fire at the Mount Joy restaurant July 24 that caused $250,000 in damages and displaced a family.

A state police fire marshal found that the fire was started around a smoker and walk in cooler.

The fire marshal also found that the fire was enhanced by the use of a natural gas line that was removed from the smoker.

Coon made comments to multiple people that the fire would not have happened if he had not been fired, according to the criminal complaint.

Tenants who lived in an attached area of the restaurant said they also saw Coon at the time of the fire.
Psychopathological Factors

- Schizophrenia and other psychosis
- Intellectual Disability
- Substance Abuse

- **Personality Disorders**
  - Mood Disorders
  - Pyromania
Personality Disorders

- 52% of recidivist arsonists had personality disorders

Borderline Personality Disorder

Personality Disorders

• ASPD had a 21 x increased risk of arson

Antisocial Personality Disorder

John Orr
Personality Disorders

- John Orr Fire Captain and Arson Investigator
- Set fire near a fire convention
- Never admitted to crimes and wrote a book to proclaim his innocence
Macdonald’s Triad of Sociopathy

- Childhood fire-setting
- Childhood bedwetting past age five
- Childhood cruelty to animals
Macdonald’s Triad of Sociopathy

• Bedwetting has fallen out of favor

• Fire-setting and animal cruelty are linked to aggression and violence in both patients and defendants

• Firesetting and animal cruelty are more associated with sexual killers than other sex offenders

Firesetting as a predictor of violence Bushfire arson bulletin no. 36 ISSN 1832-2743
Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, September 2006
Macdonald’s Triad of Sociopathy

• High risk firesetting has been found to be associated with cruelty to animals and other variables of poor impulse control

• Cruelty to animals has been independently associated with recidivist firesetting
Psychopathological Factors

• Schizophrenia and other psychosis
• Mental Retardation
• Substance Abuse
• Personality Disorders

• Mood Disorders
• Pyromania
Mood Disorders

Bipolar Disorder:

0.3% vs. 0.1%

Adjusted OR: 7

Psychopathological Factors

- Schizophrenia and other psychosis
- Mental Retardation
- Substance Abuse
- Personality Disorders
- Mood Disorders

- Pyromania
Impulse Control Disorders

• Inability to control
• Kleptomania
• Trichotillomania
• Pathological gambling increased the odds of arson 4-5 x
• Pyromania is rare
Pyromania

Repeated fire setting for no rational motive other than fascination, gratification or relief.
Pyromania

- Fire-setting is a behavior
- Arson is a crime
- Pyromania is a diagnosis
Incidence of Pyromania

- 90 recidivist arsonists
- Only 3 true pyromaniacs
- All volunteer firefighters

Pyromania Study

• Age of onset: 18
• Frequency: each 6 weeks
• Triggers: stress and boredom
• 62% co-morbid mood disorders

Pyromania in the DSM

DSM-I       yes
DSM-II      yes
DSM-III     no
DSM-IV      yes
DSM-V       yes
Fire-Setting Behavior In Youth

Curious Fire Setter

Delinquent Fire Setter
Curious Fire Setter

- Often spontaneous and opportunistic
  - Child who finds matches and plays with them in the absence of adult supervision
  - Often under the age of 7
  - Usually just one fire; rarely more than two fires

Williams, Dian L. Understanding the Arsonist. Lawyers and Judges Publishing Company. 2005
Delinquent Fire Setter

- Mean Age 13.6
- Predominantly Male (94%)
- Used as an act of vandalism or crime concealment
- Associated with family discord and impulsivity

Williams, Dian L. Understanding the Arsonist. Lawyers and Judges Publishing Company. 2005
Juvenile Firesetting and Later Behavior

- Children age 4-9
  - Firesetting is just one of many antisocial behaviors engaged in by children experiencing psychopathology and family stress
  - Overall, firesetting low in this population
  - In boys, occurs with cruelty to animals, hyperactivity and thrill seeking temperaments

Motives for Arson

- Psychopathological factors
- **Profit**
- Animosity
- Vandalism
- Crime concealment
- Political objectives
Profit Motive

A profit motive is one where the offender derives some material gain or benefit from setting a fire.

Profit Motive

The offender is also a pseudo-victim and holds some interest in the destroyed property
Profit Motive: Suspicious Factors

• Has this insured broken the law in the past?

• What is this insured's financial history?

• What is their prior loss experience?

Michael Marin
Motives for Arson

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Animosity

• Crimes committed due to feelings of anger, hatred or revenge

• Uses fire as weapon

Animosity

Feuds between neighbors, former friends and even spurned lovers.
Animosity

• Displaced aggression

• Not always an act of revenge

• Does not require a victim offender relationship

• 43% of arsons committed for revenge co-morbid substance abuse
Julio Gonzales
Julio Gonzales
Julio Gonzales
Julio Gonzalez
Motives for Arson

- Psychopathological factors
- Profit
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- **Vandalism**
- Crime concealment
- Political objectives
Vandalism

Malicious and wanton destruction of property
Vandalism
Vandalism
VANDALISM

OCD STYLE
CANADIAN VANDALISM

HAVE A NICE DAY
VANDALISM

IS NOT A VICTIMLESS CRIME.
Vandalism

• Often a manifestation of juvenile delinquency

• Very difficult to solve because of the seemingly pointless nature
Devil’s Night
Devil’s Night


*Range: 120–195 fires.
Source: Detroit Fire Department, City of Detroit.
Motives for Arson

• Psychopathological factors
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• Political objectives
Crime Concealment

The intent of concealing or, more specifically, destroying evidence pertaining to the commission of another crime.
Crime Concealment

• Unusual among arson motives in that *arson* is a secondary crime

• Examples:
  – Stolen Vehicle
  – Fingerprints
  – DNA evidence
Dr. William Petit
Motives for Arson

• Psychopathological factors
• Profit
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• Vandalism
• Crime concealment

• Political objectives
Political Objectives

Arson committed in pursuit of a political goal
Political Objectives

• Terrorism
• Racial Discrimination
• Civil Disturbance
Political Objectives
Terrorism

- Includes bombings
Political Objectives
Terrorism
Political Objectives
Terrorism

If You Build It
WE WILL BURN IT
Political Objectives
Terrorism
Political Objectives
Racial Harassment
Milton Police are investigating a Thursday night cross burning in front of a duplex in the 6600 block of Applegate Street.

Milton Fire Department and police responded to the residence just after 11 p.m. Thursday night to find the cross burning in the dirt driveway of the duplex in a predominantly black neighborhood.

The incident is being investigated as an act of criminal mischief, but charges could be filed under Florida's hate crime statute, Milton police Capt. David Cox said.

"We're hoping that somebody saw something and will give us a call," Cox said. "Because we don't have any idea who took it there or who might have done this."

Firefighters extinguished the cross, and police questioned the owner of the residence, Paula Verna King, and several neighbors.

King said she was surprised to see the burning cross, but added that she believed it to be more of a distasteful prank by her brother and a friend than a hateful threat.

King's brother, DeJohn Anthony Trotter, was questioned. Trotter denied any involvement in the cross burning, saying he had been away drinking with friends at the time the cross was lit and that he had received text messages from King telling him to stay away.
Political Objectives
Civil Disturbance
Summary

• Arson can have rational and irrational motives

• There is a strong correlation with Arson and Mental Illness

• Providers should question certain individuals about fire-setting behavior