

The use of profiling in bushfire arson: part 3—revenge-motivated and general serial arsonists

While revenge is a common motive in urban-structural arson, there is not the same specific target in bushfire arson. The focus of the offender's anger is more likely to be displaced from a specific person or institution towards society as a whole, or perhaps a particular community or group within it. For instance, a firesetter may start a fire as a way of attacking the policies or practices of a government land management agency. The following table includes a series of characteristics that were commonly observed by the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC; Sapp et al. n.d.) in cases where societal retaliation was the primary motivation. Also included is the more general profile developed by the FBI and NCAVC for serial arson offenders (Douglas et al. 1992).

Revenge-motivated: societal retaliation (serial)	General serial arsonist profile
Feels betrayed by society in general; most dangerous of the revenge-motivated arsonists	Offender who sets three or more fires at the same site or location during a limited period with a period of inactivity between the fires
Typically male; may suffer from a congenital condition affecting appearance or health	94% male—many decrease/end fire-setting activities at around 19 years; serial arsonists who continue past 19 become more frequent offenders
Single offender; does not confide in anyone	Single offender
Uses available materials; matches (leaves at scene) or cigarette lighter (takes away)	Unsophisticated methods; on-hand materials, paper and gasoline (accelerants); matches or lighter (ignition) more than half leave physical evidence (match)
Fires are premeditated and intentional; rarely targets residences or businesses. Targets have open entry; if not, fires lit outside	Targets typically opportunist or random. Majority set only one fire in a location, but may return to set fires in same location many times
Familiar location, normally less than 1–2 miles from home or workplace; commonly walks to scene	Most walk to scene of the fire. 70% of fires lit within 2 miles of offender's residence. Familiar location
Above average intelligence (based on IQ tests); generally employed, menial to skilled labour	Less educated and/or underachiever; erratic employment; unskilled; often unemployed
Juvenile record and criminal history of both misdemeanour and felony arrests; probably has one or more prison sentences	Most have prior felony arrests; two-thirds have multiple felony arrest records; two-thirds have prior misdemeanour arrests; most have multiple misdemeanour arrests. Many have a history of institutionalisation (foster homes, state care, juvenile detention, prison)
Single at the time of offences	Majority are single (>65%)
Psychological history likely; often more than one suicide attempt	Poor interpersonal relationships; socially inadequate
Leaves scene; does not watch fire; typically returns within 24 hours	More than 50% return to the scene, and of these 97% do so within 24 hours
All known cases serial arsonists; both frequency and severity of fire-setting increase over time	Frequency of fires does not change significantly, but severity tends to increase over time

References

Douglas JE et al. 1992. *Pocket guide to the crime classification manual*. New York: Lexington Books

Sapp AD et al. n.d. *A motive-based offender analysis of serial arsonists*.

http://www.interfire.org/features/serialarsonists/Motive_based/cover.asp (viewed 16 December 2005)