

Motives for committing arson: part 3 – bushfires

Most studies of arson have come from the UK and USA and focus on urban settings. Generalising from overseas studies to Australian circumstances can be difficult, and conclusions derived from overseas studies must always be handled cautiously. This is because there may be societal factors influencing the results in ways that invalidate generalisation to other populations. The role of societal factors and culture may be particularly important in relation to bushfires. The environmental factors that make Australia so fire-prone, together with the role of the bush in the national psyche, makes bushfire arson in some respects a uniquely Australian phenomenon.

Many of the motives seen in urban-structural arson are less common or differently expressed in bushfire arson. As noted in Bulletin no. 4, revenge is probably the most frequent motive for non-bushfire arson. The specific person or organisation targeted in a revenge arson attack is missing in bushfire arson. A person may still be motivated by revenge to light a fire in the bush but the anger will be displaced on to the bush. In other cases the firesetter may have feelings of resentment towards society overall. The bush may be targeted to disrupt and harm the community directly, or as a symbol representing something the community values.

While arson committed for financial gain is central to most general arson classification schemes, it is not a significant cause of bushfires. There will be isolated cases where a fire is lit by a retained firefighter who is then paid for attending the fire. However, there is no evidence to suggest this occurs to any significant extent. There will be limited occasions where a person starts a bushfire with the intention of causing damage to a building or vehicle so they can claim insurance. In some cases a fire lit to burn a car or building in a rural area may spread to the bush, causing an incidental fire.

A person who lights a bushfire is more likely to be looking for some kind of psychological rather than material reward. Some may try to boost low self-esteem or social identity by showing the power they can wield by starting a bushfire. The firesetter may feel a sense of control as they see fire services rushing to deal with the fire they have created. Some arsonists will seek recognition or attention through their fires. The fire may create the chance to be seen as a 'hero' for reporting the fire or even fighting it. Among serial bushfire arsonists there may be a high prevalence of histrionic personality disorder, characterised by dysfunctional attention-seeking and emotionality. Some bushfires are lit for excitement or thrills. The firesetter may seek stimulation from the sights and sounds of flames, sirens, fire engines, uniforms and aircraft.

In many cases bushfires, like urban fires, may be lit under the influence of a number of factors operating together. Lighting a fire in the bush might be a way of relieving boredom and creating excitement, but also a chance to gain recognition from reporting it. A firesetter may be angry at society and also suffering from a psychological disorder, though the two might be unrelated. The next Bulletin will build on this consideration of motives by presenting a suggested bushfire arson typology.

For more information:

Willis M 2004. *Bushfire arson: a review of the literature*. Research and public policy series no 61. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology