

Motives for committing arson: part 4 – a bushfire arson typology?

The following typology of deliberately lit bushfires has been developed after consideration of the overall literature. While further empirical research with bushfire arson data and offenders will be needed, this typology presents a starting point for further work and a basis for understanding why people light bushfires.

1. Bushfires lit to create excitement or relieve boredom

Vandalism – fires are lit by individuals or groups;

Stimulation – the firesetter seeks the excitement and stimulation of seeing the arrival of fire crews, and possibly media;

Activity – fires may be lit (by firefighters or others) in order to generate activity and relieve boredom from waiting for a naturally-occurring fire to break out.

2. Bushfires lit for recognition and attention

Heroism – fires are lit to gain recognition, rewards and ‘hero’ status from reporting the fire and perhaps helping fight it;

Pleading – fires are lit as a ‘cry for help’, for recognition and attention but to get help or assistance, rather than rewards or hero status.

3. Bushfires lit for a specific purpose or gain

Anger – fire is lit to secure revenge or as an expression of anger or protest;

Pragmatic – fires are lit for purposes where other means of obtaining the objective are impractical or illegal, such as for land clearing;

Material – fires are lit for material gain, such as by firefighters seeking overtime or other payments;

Altruistic – the fire is lit to achieve an aim the firesetter believes will benefit others, such as to gain funding for small rural fire services, or clear fuel loads to prevent a more serious fire in the future.

4. Bushfires lit without motive

Psychiatric – fires are lit on the basis of psychological or psychiatric impulses derived from mental disabilities;

Children – fires are lit as a form of play or experimentation.

5. Bushfires lit with mixed motives

Multiple – fires are lit on the basis of several motives arising at one time;

Incidental – bushfires result from the spread of a fire that was lit with malicious intent, but without any expectation of a bushfire occurring.

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