

National Volunteer Fire Council

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# Report on the Firefighter Arson Problem:

Context, Considerations, and Best Practices

**S FIRE INVESTIGATION**



*Supporting Those Who Serve*

# Acknowledgments

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# Executive Summary

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Firefighter arson is a long-standing problem that impacts fire departments and communities across the nation. History suggests that firefighter arson is not a new phenomenon. The problem has received more exposure in recent years in part because of the Internet. In an attempt to better understand and address the issue of firefighter arson, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), with the support of the United States Fire Administration (USFA), convened a working group comprised of fire service leaders, law enforcement and fire investigators, governmental representatives, and academic researchers from across the country to produce this report.

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This report will help the reader:

- Gain a better understanding of the historical and contemporary scope of the problem.
- Understand the range of motivations of firefighter arsonists.
- Consider the impact of these cases on the local fire department, the fire chief, and the firesetter.
- Understand the current “best practices” in terms of investigative strategies and prevention measures.

## Scope of the Problem

There currently is no national data collection system for firefighter arson cases. Without an official source for data on firefighter arsonists, researchers, fire service leaders, and investigators are forced to extrapolate based upon samples of known cases. A survey of news articles suggest that over 100 firefighters a year are arrested for arson. Though this data collection is a good start, it is nearly impossible to fully understand the full scope of the problem without a national database or tracking system.

## Identifying a Firefighter Arsonist

The data collected from media reports indicates that there is not one archetypal firefighter arsonist. Previous reports have championed the use of profiles to identify the traits and motives of a firefighter arsonist. Profiles were designed to give fire chiefs and investigators an idea of the likely

characteristics and motivations of many firefighter arsonists. They have proven popular and have been reproduced in many fire service articles, newspaper stories, and official reports. However, it has become increasingly clear that many firefighter arsonists do not fit neatly into one profile.

## The Impact of Firefighter Arson

Firefighter arson threatens the general reputation of the fire service and creates sizeable rifts within the department itself. The department is faced with intense scrutiny from the media, government officials, and the community. The aftermath of having an arsonist within the ranks can cause irreparable damage. The firefighter’s former colleagues are left to pick up the pieces and salvage their reputation, while recruitment and retention efforts suffer. Additionally, department leadership often comes under fire. It is of the utmost importance that fire service leaders, both volunteer and career, take this issue seriously and develop a collective approach to address this issue.

## Investigation

Fire departments can adopt simple strategies to identify trends and warning signs that may indicate firefighter arson. Data collection is crucial when investigating an arson case, and using mapping techniques to identify trends and patterns may prove to be valuable. Prompt information-sharing with all involved agencies will lend itself to the timely apprehension of the suspect(s). Beyond data collection, fire departments can adopt simple habits such as:

- Investigating the origin and cause of each and every fire.
- Documenting and requesting a statement from the 911 caller(s) about what they saw and from what vantage point.
- Recording the names and times of the first arriving firefighters on the scene.

The analysis of arson trends is important because it can help identify (or clear) potential suspects as well as tailor investigative strategies to the particular case.

## Prevention

Conducting background checks on potential recruits is a first step departments should take before accepting new members. It is, however, important to note that while criminal record checks are a vital and necessary part of a fire department’s “due diligence” to ensure applicants are not convicted arsonists, sex offenders, etc., they may not be sufficient. The presumption is that firefighter arsonists are



arsonists, or at least unsavory characters, who later become firefighters. While this certainly can be the case, research has indicated that the vast majority of offenders became arsonists after joining the fire service. Screening techniques will be insufficient in these cases, but they are still valuable in helping a department make a well-informed decision when accepting a new recruit.

Education about the seriousness and repercussions of setting fires and honesty about the call volume and the potential for boredom are among the best ways to prevent firefighter arson. Recruits and department members need to be aware of what constitutes arson and how arsonists are prosecuted within their state. Firefighters or new recruits may be unaware of the severity of arson, especially if they are burning a “low-risk target” such as a dumpster or vacant or abandoned buildings. Some firefighters seem to set fires with what they think are “good intentions,” such as a training exercise, unaware that their actions could be prosecuted. Department leaders must take the initiative to both openly discuss and acknowledge firefighter arson and to educate members regarding the definition and severity of arson while also adopting – and enforcing – a zero tolerance policy.

## Recommendations

- **Acknowledge the problem.**
  - The fire service and fire service organizations need to confront the problem of firefighter arson head-on and be willing to openly discuss the issue.
- **Collect official firefighter arson data nationally.**
  - A firefighter arson data field should be incorporated into the Bombing and Arson Tracking System database managed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), and the Uniformed Crime Reports (UCR) to account for the primary official arson data repositories. Moreover, given the significance of the issue, the development of a supplementary report much like the NFIRS Supplemental Forms or the Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR) would allow for more detailed analysis of cases.
- **Develop a national firefighter arson prevention strategy.**
  - A national awareness campaign and educational strat-

egy that acknowledges that firefighter arson is a problem and identifies concrete steps to address it must be developed.

- The National Fire Academy (NFA) offers an important forum that can bring fire chiefs, fire investigators, and fire supervisors together. The NFA has an important role to play in developing a national firefighter arson prevention framework for agencies across the country to adopt.
- **Adopt current best practice approaches to firefighter arson prevention training.**
  - The firefighter arson awareness programs currently in practice across the country serve as excellent examples that other jurisdictions should model.
- **Conduct background checks and applicant screenings.**
  - Fire departments should require all new recruits to complete a criminal background check.
  - Fire departments should have a comprehensive application process for new recruits.
- **Collect and analyze incident data at the local level.**
  - Fire departments can play an instrumental role in collecting and analyzing data during an arson investigation.
  - A fire chief can adopt several simple practices that can aid an investigation.
    - Note increases in certain types of fires or an increase in call volume.
    - Document the origin and cause of each fire.
    - Document the locations in which the fires occurred.
    - If possible, request a statement from the 911 caller(s) to record the incident from their point of view.
    - Document the names and times of the firefighters arriving first on the scene.
- **Adopt zero-tolerance in practice and policy.**
  - Fire service leaders should make it clear to all of their members where the line is with regard to setting fires. There should be a written, communicated, and affirmed zero-tolerance policy that clearly states that firesetting is not acceptable. The policy should also clearly specify the circumstances in which setting fires can be done (i.e. training fires that comply with all of the relevant NFPA standards, prescribed burns that include all of the required paperwork and documentation, etc.).
- **Empower your members to take a stand.**
  - Firefighters as a whole are disgusted by the thought that some firefighters are willing to risk their lives and the lives of others by setting fires. This goes against everything the fire service stands for. We should tap into that sentiment by not only talking about this topic occasionally but also reminding firefighters that when they “See Something, Say Something.” This strategy does not only apply to homeland security, it also applies to firehouse security. If they have suspicions about another member they should be encouraged to inform their chief or another leader (even if they prefer to do so anonymously).

# Introduction

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**“ Before the fire, we were just sitting around bored. We were talking about how the Chief yells at us for the things we do wrong and everybody was saying ‘Let’s wait for the next fire to come out and maybe we can do good on it’... And then the words, ‘Set a fire’ came up. ”**  
(Price, 1990)

The uncomfortable topic of firefighter arson has attracted considerable public attention in recent years. This negative attention is not easily dismissed as it threatens to tarnish the positive reputation firefighters and fire service leaders have carefully crafted for centuries. The fire service has and must remain vigilant in identifying individual cases of firesetting, identifying the root causes, and developing workable strategies to preempt future cases.

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The National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC), a nonprofit organization representing the American volunteer fire and emergency medical services, has returned to the topic it first addressed in the early 1990s with the report, *NVFC Study: Firesetting Firefighters – The Arsonist in the Fire Department*. The NVFC, with financial support from the United States Fire Administration (USFA), recently convened a working group comprised of fire service leaders, law enforcement and fire investigators, governmental representatives, and academic researchers from across the country. The goal of the working group has been to re-examine the issue from multiple vantage points, identify methods of prevention, and provide useful information for affected departments. This report will address each of the various aspects in greater detail. In particular, the report will help the reader (1) gain a better understanding of the historical and contemporary scope of the problem, (2) understand the range of motivations of firefighter arsonists, (3) consider the impact of these cases on the local fire department, the fire chief, and the firesetter, and (4) understand the current “best practices” in terms of investigative strategies and prevention measures.

This document is certainly not the first to highlight and attempt to address the topic of firefighter arson, yet it



draws upon these previous documents, recommendations, and techniques to highlight current best practices, question traditional explanations, and develop multi-faceted approaches to address the problem. As such, the goal here is not simply to reproduce the previous works but to reconsider both the problem and the potential solutions in order to develop a more robust understanding of the complexity of the topic and to ultimately identify solutions to preventing firefighter arson as well as handling it effectively when it occurs.

The historical literature on the topic dates back to the 19th century, which suggests this is not a new problem. However,





even with greater attention to the topic in recent years, it is still difficult to conclusively determine the full scope of the problem. This report will address the historical context of the issue as well as highlight current examples as we seek to gain a better handle on the size and scope of the problem. The historical foundation is important as it reminds us that firefighter arson is not a new phenomenon, so it requires long-term strategies rather than short-term fixes.

Another area in which this report will diverge somewhat from the previous literature is in terms of the debate about motivations for the firesetting among some firefighters, in particular the suggestion that firefighter arsonists fit a single identifiable profile. As will be discussed at length later in this paper, it is first not clear whether these profiles are truly representative of all firefighter arsonists, and more importantly, if these profiles can authoritatively distinguish between firesetting firefighters and non-firesetting firefighters.

The goal here is not to dismiss the profiles; rather the goal is simply to ensure that the profiles do not blind us to firefighter arsonists who do not fit the profile. Rather than offer a single unified profile, we have chosen to spotlight a range of motives and types of firefighter arsonists and discuss cases to give readers an understanding of the diversity of firefighter arsonists instead of just their occasional similarities.

Following Fire Chief Ron Lindroth's (2003) lead, this report will also share insights from a fire chief, fire investigator, and firefighter arsonist regarding the impact of these cases on the department and those involved. While it may appear

obvious that such a case will have a significant impact on the fire department and its personnel, it is imperative to the reputation of the fire service as a whole to consider how to handle a case of firefighter arson from the first concerns/allegations through to press briefings and repairing the department's public image. Perhaps most compelling are the insights of convicted firefighter arsonist Steven Specht. The purpose is not necessarily to encourage sympathy, but rather to give some insight into his thought process and provide a 'testimonial' about the lasting impact of his arrest.

Finally, this report will discuss in detail the various prevention strategies and screening techniques currently available or in practice. While this report has a strong foundation in applied research, the primary goal is to mitigate future cases. Accordingly, we will highlight and discuss a range of strategies that fire service leaders can adopt or consider in an effort to avoid future occurrences. The discussion of the various strategies in terms of both prevention campaigns and applicant screening techniques will also include important discussions about the potential limitations and considerations of the various approaches. The goal is not to discourage the adoption of the various techniques, but rather to provide fire service leaders with sufficient information in order to develop custom strategies that suit their particular jurisdiction, budget, and organizational structure. Unfortunately, there is neither a one-size-fits-all approach nor a silver bullet solution to the problem of firefighter arson. Thus, this report will provide a circumspect overview of the various practical approaches.

But first, we begin with a brief survey of the historical nature of the problem.

# Background

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The problem of firesetting among some firefighters has gained considerable exposure in recent years. With the rise of the Internet and digital media, it is now possible to hear about a late-breaking case half a world away as the handcuffs are closed. As a result, it is hard to determine if this is a recent phenomenon or even if it is a growing problem.

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Unfortunately, the issue of firefighter arson is not new, although it is impossible to definitively say if the problem is increasing or if we are simply catching and prosecuting more offenders. At present, we do not have an accurate estimate of the current number of firefighter arsonists because official data is not recorded, and it is even more

difficult to get accurate data about historical cases. As a result, we are forced to rely upon historical records, newspaper archives, and other anecdotal accounts to gain an understanding of the historical nature of the problem.

For example, British fire historian G. V. Blackstone (1957: 115) recounted the story of the ‘Shelford [UK] Arsonist,’ a farm laborer and part-time firefighter who was arrested and subsequently executed for setting a series of fires over a five-year period in the early 1830s – allegedly for the beer and money he was given for his service. Similarly, Lewis and Yarnall (1950: 194) cite several German books, written in mid-nineteenth century, that also discuss the phenomenon of arsonists actively participating in the extinguishment effort either as recognized firefighters or simply as ‘helpful’ bystanders. Here in the United States a quick survey of the archives of the Atlanta Constitution: “*Incendiary Fireman*” (1874), the New York Times: “*Volunteer Firemen As Incendiaries*” (1874), “*Fireman Accused of Arson*” (1898), the Chicago Daily Tribune: “*Incendiary Firemen*” (1881), and the Washington Post: “*A Fireman Who Is An Incendiary*” (1888), “*Firemen As Incendiaries*” (1891) suggest that that topic was already an established problem here by the turn of the century.

Since then the topic of firefighter arson has emerged from time to time as local or particularly noteworthy cases surfaced. When cases have come to light, fire service leaders have consistently focused upon three priorities – assuring the public that the firefighter(s) was/were not representative of the upstanding character of the rest of the department, restoring the public image of the local department that was often tarnished by the incident, and developing strategies to prevent future occurrences. These three priorities remain just as important today. In most cases the local fire service leaders were left to their own devices or the guidance of local colleagues on how to handle the crisis.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the topic transitioned from a series of presumably isolated local issues to an emerging national concern. A number of states began to address the topic at a state or regional level. In New York, for instance, the Suffolk County Arson Task Force developed a training program for new firefighter recruits. This attention also resulted in the creation of state laws mandating background checks and prohibiting convicted arsonists from serving as firefighters. In South Carolina, the



Forestry Commission and other agencies began to identify a worrying trend and set about studying the problem and developing a similar training program to educate firefighters and remind them of the social and legal ramifications of arson. Ken Cabe (1996) of the Forestry Commission subsequently published the findings of this effort, in which he highlighted the findings of their research as well as the success of their intervention – points we will return to later.

At a national level the topic was gaining momentum of its own. Tim Huff with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime began a similar research project, in which he interviewed 66 incarcerated firefighter arsonists. Huff's (1994) study gave additional insights into the familial and social background of firefighter arsonists. During the same period, the NVFC convened a working group of fire service leaders, fire investigators, and others to raise awareness of the problem and discuss strategies to address the problem. The NVFC working group conducted a national survey to gain a better understanding of the various efforts across the country to address the issue.

Both the NVFC survey and Huff's report found at the time that although "many states do little in terms of awareness or prevention... many of the tools needed to combat this problem are in the hands of most chiefs and departments" (NVFC, 1994). Yet, as the NVFC survey respondents reminded us, we must first fully acknowledge the problem:

*Everyone within the fire service must be, and should be, prepared to admit that there is a problem and that precise, firm methods are needed to combat this situation. To ignore the problem or suggest that it does not exist will only increase the damage caused by the arson firefighters involved, as well as destroy the morale of the other firefighters in their departments. There is a problem, we cannot ignore the problem, we must talk to our members about firefighter arson. We must investigate, charge, and convict those that are committing this crime.*

(NVFC, 1994)

Taken together, these various efforts not only helped fire chiefs, state fire marshals/commissioners and elected officials understand the scope of the problem, but also provided them with a number of potential tools or strategies to tackle the problem.

More recently the topic of firefighter arson reemerged as a national concern. With a number of cases making national



news, various organizations and authors addressed the topic from multiple angles. Working Fire Training published a four part video series based on interviews with fire chiefs and fire investigators in Camden County, NJ (1999, December – 2000, March). Masters students Jonah Smith (2003) and S. Michael Kinney (2003) studied the topic. Psychologist Rebekah Doley (1998; 2003b) also drew attention to her work screening prospective firefighters in Australia.

Most importantly, however, the USFA commissioned a study published in 2003 to look into the scope of the problem, previous research on the topic, and successful strategies to combat the problem. This study, entitled *Special Report: Firefighter Arson* (TR-141, January 2003), offered the most comprehensive analysis of not only why firefighter arsonists set fires, but also how the fire service can address the topic. Since that time there has been a flurry of trade journal articles and a few academic studies dedicated to the topic.

This study revisits the topic nearly a decade later. The primary intention is to understand the scope of the problem today and to identify ways in which to mitigate the risk. The need to revisit the topic rests partly in the realization that firefighter arsonists are not necessarily cut from the same cloth and neither should the strategies designed to address them. Firefighters have historically set fires for a litany of reasons, some readily apparent and others less so. Our understanding of the scope and roots of the problem is evolving, as is our arsenal of prevention and investigation strategies, and for these reasons it is certainly time to revisit the topic.

# The Scope of the Problem

When reviewing the growing body of literature on the topic of firefighter arson, one recommendation emerges almost unanimously – the establishment of a consistent national database to record and analyze the incidence of firefighter arson. At present, it is not possible to accurately determine or even authoritatively speculate as to the true incidence of firefighter arson cases nationally, or internationally, because there is not a standardized database to record cases for analysis. Most troublingly, as Cabe (1996) notes, “without comprehensive information, the natural tendency is to view each case as an isolated incident.” Without an official data source, fire service leaders, researchers, and media outlets are often left to speculate on the scope of the problem based upon cursory archive searches, anecdotal accounts of known cases, or small samples of known offenders. As a result, suggestions as to the scope of the problem have varied wildly depending on the person and their particular perspective. One goal of this report is not simply to renew the call for a national database, but to highlight some changes in the works and discuss the findings of more recent research, which gives us more extensive insights into the topic.

When attempting to gain an understanding of the scope of the problem, it is essential to place this within the context of the wider fire service. As the USFA (2003: 3, emphasis in original) report notes, “With over one million volunteer and paid firefighters the number of those who cause fires represents only a fraction of the number who otherwise serve honorably.” So while we must acknowledge that this problem exists, we must not lose sight, or allow others to lose sight, of the incredible service and dedication firefighters, career and volunteer, offer throughout the country. This dedication, however, is threatened each and every time a firefighter crosses the line and sets a fire. Exactly how many firefighters have crossed that line remains an open and contentious question.



Without an official source for data on firefighter arsonists, researchers, fire service leaders, investigators are forced to extrapolate based upon samples of known cases. Lewis and Yarnell, for instance, documented 51 firefighter arsonists who set fires alone and 40 cases that involved anywhere from two to 15 firefighters setting fires in groups – although they unfortunately did not clarify the actual numbers of group firefighter arsonists in total. Likewise, Huff (1994) studied 66 firefighter arsonists and Cabe (1996) studied 80 firefighters arrested over a two-year period. Taken together, it is difficult to determine how many firefighter arsonists have been arrested nationwide.

More recent research by Hinds-Aldrich (2008; 2011a) used historical newspaper archives and Internet sources to develop a database of firefighter arson cases. His research presents a startling picture of the scope of the problem. He documented 1,213 firefighters arrested for arson dating back to the early 1800s, of which 1,102 were American firefighters. While this staggering number was spread over nearly two-centuries, the majority of those fires occurred within the past 25 years (mean 1997; Std. Dev. 18.6) topping out with 104 firefighters arrested in 2008 alone – though Hinds-Aldrich notes that this apparent growth curve could be partially attributed to increased media attention and more diligent and successful enforcement efforts. It is worth repeating here that even with these significant numbers, this still only represents a small fraction of the million firefighters serving admirably across the United States.

This large dataset, while disturbing, offers further insights into the complex phenomenon noted by Huff and Cabe.

For instance, consistent with their profiles, Hinds-Aldrich notes that the firefighters were predominantly young with a mean age of 24 years old (std. dev. 7.7, mode 19), although it is important to note that it also included 14 firefighter arsonists between the ages of 50 and 64 years old. Similarly, the sample was predominantly male, although 25 female firefighters were also arrested. Just over half of the firefighters arrested set fires in collaboration with other firefighters, suggesting that group dynamics play an important role in many of the cases. While volunteer and paid-on-call firefighters comprised the bulk of arrests, 57 of the firefighters arrested were in fact paid structural firefighters. Perhaps most disturbingly, however, 101 of the firefighters were ranking officers, including 27 fire chiefs. This data, however, should not cast a pall over the fire service as a whole; rather, it should unite us in our commitment to forcefully and consistently address this scourge.

With the annual arrest of approximately 100 firefighter arsonists making headlines in recent years, it is essential that the long-standing call for national data collection to come to fruition. There has been some progress in this regard, but there remains a long way to go. The NVFC recently developed an online tool in which fire chiefs and fire investigators can input data on cases in their jurisdiction or that they are aware of. The tool is designed to both streamline the collection of national data and be user-friendly for those inputting data and for the end-user conducting analysis.

However, since arson data can be reported to multiple law enforcement and fire service databases, it is important to make sure there is a method of tracking firefighter arson in each of the major official data sources. This may be as simple as adding an area to note that the person arrested was a firefighter at the time of the fire(s) in existing

databases such as the Bombing and Arson Tracking System database managed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. Just as how differentiating between civilian fire deaths and firefighter fire deaths in the National Fire Incident Reporting System database has helped us gain a more robust understanding of the causes of line-of-duty-deaths, so too can a short supplemental form or field that denotes firefighter arson cases help us gain a better understanding of the nature of the problem. Similarly, although the FBI often excludes arson statistics from its annual Uniformed Crime Reports calculations due to reporting inconsistencies, it is important to incorporate a mechanism to report arson if the subject arrested was affiliated with the fire service (and in what capacity).

A national arson database was proposed in the 110th Congress. The Managing Arson Through Criminal History or MATCH Act called for the creation of guidelines and incentives for states to establish arsonist registries and to require the Attorney General to establish a national arsonist registry and notification program (Martinez, 2010). Unfortunately, the MATCH Act did not become law.

In the nearly 20 years since various states and the federal agencies began calling for the establishment of a national database to track cases of firefighter arson, we are only now beginning to see some forward progress. As we move forward, it is useful to recall Ken Cabe's (1996) advice: "If you look in enough dark closets, sooner or later you're going to find a skeleton. Then you have a choice: slam the door and hide it, or turn on the light and start cleaning." Official national statistics will undoubtedly cast an uncomfortable light on this ugly problem, but it is only when we "turn on the light" that can we hope to affect the meaningful and lasting change necessary to get down to the business of cleaning.





# Motives for Firefighter Arson

As we come to grips with the potential size of the firefighter arson problem, it is important to consider why a firefighter might cross the line and set the fires they were sworn to suppress. The question of what motivates any type of arsonist remains a point of considerable debate, but it is even more pronounced when considering firefighter arsonists. In particular, the question often becomes whether they have a psychological compulsion to set fires or if they set fires in response to some aspect of their social environment.

When it comes to firefighter arsonists there has been little in the way of consensus as to why some firefighters set fires. Overall, this lack of consensus further illustrates the point that there is not one archetypal firefighter arsonist. That said, something that continues to cast a shadow over the topic is the debate about the existence of ‘pyromania,’ an explanation popularized by the newspapers and politicians at the turn of the century when the topic first gained prominence.

Arsonists were particularly reviled at the turn of the 20th century. They were treated with equal measures of fascination and hatred. When coupled with tales of betrayed oaths and disgraced public servants, stories of firefighters arrested for setting fires made compelling newspaper fodder. These early articles not only recounted all the lurid details, but also began to speculate as to why firefighters would

set the very fires they were responsible for extinguishing. Typically there was a presumption that there was something ‘wrong’ with the arsonist, or *firebug*, as they were commonly called. They were often presumed to have some form of pyromania, a psychological drive to set fires.

However, while many articles suggested the respective firefighter arsonist was a pyromaniac, others offered alternative explanations that were often far more circumspect, as in the following from an article in 1931:

*The remarkable superiority in firefighting displayed by Volunteer Company 2 of Beverly, to the chagrin of its rival, Company 1 there, went up in thin smoke today... It all started as a result of the usual friendly rivalry between “vamps.” It was on that basis for a time, but fires ordinarily being scarce in Beverly, Company 2 became impatient and ill content to play checkers in the firehouse when there were honors to be won through “smoke-eating.” Then fires began breaking out with regularity. Each time, no sooner did the alarm sound than the members of Company 2 were trundling their chemical engine to the street, and with that love of thunderous noise peculiar to the fire-fighter, were making their way to the scene whooping like cowboys.*

(New York Times, 1931)

These findings proved even more troubling, for it suggested the seed of the problem was not simply within the mind of the disturbed arsonist but also potentially within the firehouse itself. *It suggested that these were not necessarily arsonists who became firefighters but potentially firefighters who became arsonists.* This suggestion understandably did not sit well with those who took their oath to protect the public very seriously.

Public understanding of the topic came full circle in 1951 with the publication of Nolan Lewis and Helen Yarnell’s watershed book titled simply: *Pyromania: Pathological Firesetting*, which put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the arsonists themselves. After reviewing the case histories of hundreds of convicted arsonists of all types, the two prominent psychoanalysts wrote the most thorough discussion of the topic of firesetting in general to date. In doing so they appeared particularly interested in firefighters



# Fire Setter Questionnaire

**Name:** Steven Specht

**Fire Department:** 6th Ward 7th District Pearl River Fire Department

**City:** Pearl River

**State:** Louisiana

**Age:** 17 when I started setting fires. 19 When arrested. 30 years old now.

## Why did you join the fire service?

I was raised in the fire service. In my family everyone was involved in the fire service.

## How many years did you serve at your department?

I fought brush fires as a child, but officially became a firefighter at age 16, so 3 years.

## Do you have family in the fire service and/or your department?

Yes, my father, mother, and sister were all involved in the fire service.

## Did you ever set, or have the urge to set, fires before joining the fire service?

No. I only set fires as part of the fire service.

## Did you have previous encounters with the law?

Truancy in school, and I was convicted of minor marijuana possession charges.

## When did you first decide to set fires and what was your reasoning or motivation to do so?

At age 16 I joined the fire service. A senior firefighter was assigned as my training officer (he was 19). He encouraged me to go out and set grass fires so that we could respond and put them out for training purposes. He showed me how to set the fires and gave me pointers on how not to get caught.

## How many fires did you set? How long were you engaging in this behavior?

I set 50-75 grass fires over approximately 2 years.

## Did you act alone or did you have accomplices from within the department or the community?

Even when I was alone there were accomplices who knew that I was setting the fires. At one point I hooked up with a neighboring fire department and learned that several of them set fires. They were setting structures on fire and were encouraging/pressuring me to do the same. This is when I notified my boss who contacted authorities. I think 11 or 12 firefighters were ultimately arrested from our two departments for arson fires.

## What were your primary targets and how did you choose where/what to burn?

I only set grass fires in rural areas. I chose areas that were not dead ends so that I could light the fire and continue away without drawing attention to my vehicle.

## Did you call in your own fires?

No, I did not.

## Did you respond to your own fires?

Yes, all of them.

## Did you fully understand the severity of your actions when setting the fire(s)? Were you fully aware that your actions were against the law?

No, I did not understand the severity of my actions, although I knew that it was against the law.

## Was anyone injured as a result of the fire(s)?

No.

## Did your department have any training or prevention measures in place for firefighter arson?

No, I received no training regarding firefighter arson. Like I said, firefighter arson was encouraged.

## What sentence did you receive for your crimes?

I was sentenced to 2 years of probation, community service, and restitution based on my cooperation with authorities.

## Any additional information you would like to include:

If I could go back in time I would never have set a fire. What I did has made my life difficult. I loved being a firefighter and now I have lost access to that love and seriously damaged relationships with my family and friends.

I grew up hunting and now I can never own or possess a firearm so I have lost that important part of my life.

I have actually traveled around the U.S. with the two individuals that arrested me (ATF Agent Daniel Hebert and Louisiana State Fire Marshal Richard Jones) and share my experience as a firefighter arsonist. I feel that I have to do this because of the poor choices I've made and to try and make right the wrongs I have committed. I hope that my talks to firefighters and fire investigators may help prevent others from making the same mistakes that I did.



and “fire buffs” who set fires, dedicating a chapter to each. Here they wrote case summaries for a handful of firefighter arsonists and noted various mental, physical, and social “defects” that could presumably begin to explain their firesetting.

Their analysis offered an important counterpoint regarding the role of alcohol, suggestibility, and peer pressure in firesetting, particularly among group firesetters, while separately focusing attention upon disturbed firefighters. This strongly suggests that in order to address the problem of firesetting among some firefighters, we too should focus on identifying and excluding this strata of disturbed firefighters. The tension between the social and psychological roots of firesetting among firefighters remains to this day.

Lewis and Yarnell made a second major contribution to our understanding of the reasons some firefighters may set fires. They discuss the potential that some firefighter arsonists are attempting to be seen as a hero. With this type of firesetting, which they term “vanity” firesetting, they presume that the arsonists set the fire to look good to the community, particular people, or their colleagues. This type of arsonist is interested in this sort of recognition, they reason in an often-quoted passage, because they are “little men with grandiose social ambitions whose natural equipment dooms them to insignificance” (1951: 228). Said another way, they are (generally young) men who would like to be admired or respected in their family, group of friends, or fire department, but are either not intelligent or skilled enough to achieve the sort of respect they crave. So as a result they presumably set fires so they can “save the day” or demonstrate how dedicated they are. The two psychological profiles discussed in the next section revisits this presumption that firefighter arsonists are socially inept, or at least socially insignificant, and that this explains both their reasons for joining the fire service as well as setting fires.

Since the publication of Lewis and Yarnell’s work, there has been a marked effort to move away from and ultimately

dismiss the concept of pyromania altogether. A number of the researchers and analysts that have looked at the issue of firefighter arson have also published articles that argue that pyromania does not exist as a stand-alone medio-legal diagnosis, or put more simply, that it is little more than a “myth” (Huff et al 2001, see also Doley, 2003a; Geller et al 1997). Even the American Psychological Association has consistently narrowed the definition in successive editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM). Although the current edition, DSM-IV, still includes pyromania, it contains important caveats (APA, 2011):

*E. The fire setting is not done for monetary gain, as an expression of sociopolitical ideology, to conceal criminal activity, to express anger or vengeance, to improve one's living circumstances, in response to a delusion or hallucination, as a result of impaired judgment (e.g. in dementia, Mental Retardation, Substance Intoxication).*

*F. The fire setting is not better accounted for by Conduct Disorder, a Manic Episode, or Antisocial Personality Disorder.*

Whether pyromania exists as a psychological disorder or not remains an open debate amongst psychologists and psychiatrists. What is clear, however, is that much of the firesetting among firefighters can be better accounted for by a range of other explanations.

There has been growing acknowledgement that there is not one explanation or motivation that can cover all forms of firesetting. Beginning with James Inciardi’s (1970) original arson typology, the effort has primarily been to develop a more comprehensive typology that accounts for all of the various motivations. This effort culminated in the Douglas et al’s (2006) *Crime Classification Manual*, which identified and discussed six broad motives for arson: vandalism,



excitement, revenge, profit, crime concealment, and extremism. Missing from this typology is any mention of pyromania, though other typologies do occasionally include ‘psychological’ firesetting as a category. It is important to note that these motivations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, so it is possible and probable that an offender may exhibit characteristics of multiple categories.

With the excitement motive in particular, we are reminded of the social explanations noted as early as the turn of the century, for they remain valid today. While it is unlikely that many firefighters still play checkers in the down time between calls, competitiveness and boredom continue to be hallmarks of many departments. Time and again, those who have studied the firefighter arson phenomenon have noted that some firefighters decide to “put their training and expectations into action by setting the fires themselves” (Huff 1996: 2). For some, “they’ve completed a home study course plus 96 hours of formal instruction [which is required in South Carolina]. They are excited, eager and motivated. And the alarm doesn’t sound nearly enough” (Huff 1996). When we read this carefully, we note that ‘curing’ boredom may only be part of the story.

There could also be a second, less obvious subtext – the potential intention to provide training opportunities, or even as Doley (2003b) notes, “to create enough work to justify the resources allocated to the brigade [fire department], particularly in rural areas.” These may well go hand-in-hand. Regardless, the point to note here is that, historically, many “appeared not to have the inclination to set any fires before joining the department. The idea occurred to them later” (Huff, 1996: 3).

One of the most popular explanations for why some firefighters set fires is the desire to be seen as a hero. As noted earlier, since the 1950s, if not before, it is often presumed that many firefighter arsonists are ‘vanity firesetters’ or have a ‘hero complex.’ Vanity firesetters apparently set fires in order to warn others or potentially rescue trapped persons, or even simply to demonstrate how alert and helpful they are. Given the potential that citizens may be endangered in order for the firefighter arsonist to rescue them, this type of firesetting is understandably seen as particularly heinous. A number of civilians and firefighters have been seriously injured, disfigured, and even killed by firefighter arsonists, although it is not always possible to determine in each instance if the firefighter arsonist hoped to be seen as a hero. While there is a tendency to presume that most firefighter arsonists set fires to be seen as a hero, there is little or no concrete evidence that this is a common motive.

Most studies have suggested that firefighter arsonists typically start with small ‘nuisance fires’ such as trash or brush. While many escalate to more serious fires, they still often target forests, vehicles, and vacant or abandoned structures. As Huff notes, it is less common, but not unheard of, for them to set fires in occupied buildings. Moreover, there is always a risk of injury to firefighters, bystanders, or occupants. Whether their goal is to be recognized by the community-at-large, as is often presumed, or simply to be accepted by their more established peers, as Hinds-Aldrich (2011a) argues, the results are the same. Even seemingly ‘harmless’ fires to dumpsters, brush, and vacant buildings recklessly put the lives of firefighters and civilians in danger and should be treated as such.

While there is a tendency to presume that all firefighter arsonists set fires for the purposes of excitement or ‘vanity,’ we must not forget that firefighter arsonists, like other arsonists, may set fires for a number of other reasons. In fact, firefighter arsonists have been arrested for setting fires for all of the motives listed above, and often the fires appear to fit multiple categories. Besides excitement, vandalism is another common motive. For instance, a young firefighter was recently arrested for setting fire to a large number of Porta-Potties on construction sites.

Several firefighters have also been arrested for setting revenge-motivated fires to buildings they had built or repaired but had not received payment for their services, or even to their own fire station in response to a reprimand. A number of firefighters have admitted setting fires for the pay some receive for responding or to secure a place on a wildland firefighting crew, as was the case in the massive Rodeo-Chediski Fire in Arizona. In a particularly disturbing case, a Memphis firefighter murdered his newlywed wife in a domestic disturbance, then set fire to his house to conceal the crime. The case went from sad to horrific when he shot and killed a responding sheriff’s deputy and two firefighters, including the firefighter that was covering his ‘sick’ leave. Finally, firefighters have even been arrested for setting fires for political or quasi-political purposes, such as an animal activist who set fire to a slaughterhouse then became a firefighter before being arrested – though some might reasonably object to terming him a firefighter arsonist.

Taken together, the surprising diversity of potential motivations for firefighters to set fires emphasizes the point that there simply is not one model that all firefighter arsonists fall into. However, while we must be cognizant not to presume that all firefighter arsonists are homogenous, at the same time there are some statistical similarities that many, though not all, share.

# Profiling Firefighter Arsonists

The question of what motivates a firefighter arsonist often emerges only after one is arrested. The discussion of motivations unfortunately often provides little tangible benefit to those attempting to prevent firefighters from becoming arsonists or potential arsonists from joining the fire department in the first place.

As noted earlier, one of the primary tools Huff (1994) and Cabe (1996) offered were ‘profiles’ of statistically ‘typical’ firefighter arsonists. These profiles (see chart on page 17) were designed to give fire chiefs and investigators an idea of the likely characteristics of many firefighter arsonists. The goal was to help fire chiefs and investigators identify potential firefighter arsonists and/or narrow the suspect pool if the investigative leads pointed to the fire department. These distinct profiles are striking in their similarities.

There are, however, a number of limitations that must be considered, particularly when one attempts to use these profiles as the basis for prevention strategies or applicant screening. It is important to note that by pointing out these limitations, the intention is not to discredit this important and pioneering research; rather, the point is to ensure that these profiles do not blind us to “non-typical” firefighter arsonists or lead us to necessarily presume that firefighter arsonists are so distinctive or abnormal that you will ‘know one when you see one.’ Unfortunately, history has shown it is simply not that easy to identify a potential firefighter arsonist by gut feeling alone. For every news account in which the fire chief lamented, ‘I knew he looked like trouble’ or ‘I had a bad feeling about that one,’ there were at least as many that expressed dismay that, ‘he was my hardest working and most dependable firefighter,’ ‘I never would have expected it to be him,’ or even occasionally, ‘he comes from a great family that have been members of the fire department for years.’ It is important not to focus too narrowly upon the profiles as it may cause us to only look at those who fit the profile and overlook those who do not.

The limitations stem, in part, from the size and composition of the samples they are based on. For instance, both research studies drew from small samples of arrested and convicted firefighter arsonists, 66 in Huff’s research and 80 in Cabe’s research. This is important because the clearance



Firefighters charged in 3 houes fires in Massachusetts, (left to right) Patrick K. Elliott, Donald C. Moores, Jordan R. Frank, and Brian S. Findlay in court.

rate for all types of arson hovers around 15 percent nationally (Hall, 2005). So in the vast majority of arson cases no one is arrested for the crime. We might presume similar rates apply to instances of firefighter arson as well. Similarly, arson is a crime of detection, which means that without an investigation that determines the cause to be arson, there is legally no crime. As Huff and Cabe noted, firefighter arsonists generally begin by setting small fires before graduating to larger fires, so unless an investigation is conducted for every fire, even minor fires, we may overlook numerous instances of arson, not only those potentially set by firefighters. Worse yet, we may overlook the early fires sets by firefighters and only notice the pattern when they finally graduate to larger and potentially more deadly fires.

A second limitation stems from the types of cases that were selected. When reviewing Cabe’s research, the cases all occurred in South Carolina. It is not clear if these cases were representative of cases in Kansas or California, for instance. Again this is does not discount the findings but should be taken into consideration when applying the profiles nationally or internationally. Similarly, Huff’s research was based on interviews and case histories of incarcerated firefighter arsonists. Given that establishing the burden of legal proof in arson cases is often difficult, many cases are plea-bargained to short or non-custodial sentences such as probation and/or restitution (Martinez, 2010). This means that those who were incarcerated were likely prolific firesetters, particularly dangerous firesetters (such as setting fires in occupied buildings or that resulted in injuries or fatalities), or had previous criminal histories. It is unclear as

Photo credit: Worcester Telegram and Gazette

## Firefighter Arsonist Profiles

South Carolina Forestry Commission (Cabe)	FBI National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (Huff)
White male, age 17-26	White male, age 17-25
Product of disruptive, harsh, or unstable rearing environment.	One or both parents missing from home during childhood. If from an intact home, the emotional atmosphere was mixed and unstable.
Poor relationship with father, overprotective mother.	Dysfunctional. One of their parents left home before the child reached age 17. Cold, distant, hostile, or aggressive relationship with natural father.
If married, poor marital adjustment.	Poor marital adjustment. If not married, still living at home with parents.
Lacking in social and interpersonal relationships.	Lack of stable interpersonal relationships.
Poor occupational adjustment, employed in low-paying jobs.	Poor occupational adjustment. Menial laborer, skilled laborer, clerical jobs.
Fascinated with the fire service and its trappings.	Interested in fire service in the context that it provides an arena for excitement, not for the sake of public safety.
May be facing unusual stress (family, financial, or legal problems).	Alcoholism, childhood hyperactivity, homosexuality, depression, borderline personality disorder, and suicidal tendencies.
Average to above average intelligence, but poor or fair academic performance in school.	Mixed findings on intelligence, but most arsonists have been found to have average to higher intelligence. Poor academic performance.

to whether these incarcerated firefighter arsonists were typical of all firefighter arsonists across the country – particularly those firefighter arsonists who apparently were the extremely helpful, enthusiastic, ‘firefighter-of-the-year’ types.

A final limitation that must be addressed is probably the most significant. Can the profiles consistently and meaningfully distinguish between firefighter arsonists and firefighters that are not arsonists? Said another way, even if every firefighter arsonist in the country fit the profile exactly, does every firefighter that fits the profile also set fires, or are there firefighters that do not fit the profile that set fires? Profiles are most effective if they can limit the number of false positives.

This is a limitation that forensic psychologist and management consultant Rebekah Doley (2003b) emphasizes in her discussion about screening firefighter applicants. As she notes, “The similarities between firefighters who light fires and those who don’t emphasizes how difficult it is to spot the threat from within.” As a result, she acknowledges that these profiles as well as the more sophisticated screening tests derived from them, the Arson Screening and Prediction Test and her Firefighter Selection and Screening

Interview, should not be used to make final determinations of whether to hire/accept an applicant or not (Doley 2003b). It is important to remember that these often-cited profiles should be viewed primarily as a quick crib sheet to remind fire chiefs and recruitment personnel to probe deeper into the questionable applicant’s background and perhaps make it clear to them what is acceptable as well as unacceptable behavior – not just in terms of setting fires.

These profiles, have been reproduced in many fire service articles, newspaper stories, and official reports. They are popular in large part because they condense a complex phenomenon into a succinct and straightforward chart. The problem, however, remains that when one focuses on or simply copies the profile it becomes easy to overlook the more nuanced aspects of these incredibly well-researched reports. It trades precision for brevity and paints an incomplete picture of the problem of firesetting firefighters. To counter this tendency, this report offers a broad sample of cases located in the Appendix that help illustrate the range of motivations as well as the different types of firefighter arsonists. The goal again is to emphasize that while firefighter arsonists may share some statistical similarities, they are not homogenous.



# The Impact of Firefighter Arson

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**“ To keep the storyline going, the media begin to focus on every aspect of the case, the fire suppression operations, and the overall leadership of the department. Questions will focus on why the fire department did not know – or, did they know? The questions continue: Who knew, and how long did they know? How could this criminal have been allowed to enter the ranks? Was there a cover-up? The rumors and speculation continue until the next major media story breaks or the media have their pound of flesh. ...Along the way, careers beyond the offenders can be ruined. ”**  
**(Martinez, 2010: 2)**

Overall, firefighters across the United States enjoy widespread public support. In fact, according to a recent Harris Poll (2009) firefighters ranked first in terms of the most prestigious occupations. This positive public perception has been earned by centuries of firefighters whose good deeds, devotion, and diligence have secured this reputation.

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Unfortunately, when firefighters are arrested for setting fires their actions directly threaten this reputation. As Fire Chief Ron Lindroth (2003) notes, this betrayal not only threatens the general reputation of the fire service

but also the firefighter’s former colleagues, who are left to pick up the pieces and salvage their reputation within the community. For many fire service leaders, this is where the greatest betrayal comes from.

Firefighter arson incidents can significantly impact the communities’ perception of the fire department. This sense of betrayal is not limited to those community members who may have had property damaged or sustained injuries. The wider community is likely to have a strong reaction that may have both immediate and more lasting effects. Citizens have historically viewed firefighters as protectors – brave and selfless individuals who will sacrifice their own personal safety for others. When a local firefighter is exposed as arsonist, that vision is likely to be compromised and that



# Fire Chief Questionnaire

**Name:** Chief Ron Lindroth

**Fire Department:** I am currently at Steamboat Springs Fire Rescue. The incident described here occurred while I served as the Assistant Chief at Livermore Fire Protection District.

**State:** Colorado

**How many firefighters were involved in this incident?**  
One.

**When did the firefighter(s) join the department? How long after joining the department did the firesetting begin?**

He joined the department when he turned 18 in 2003. He was there for one year before the firesetting began.

**Describe their time with your department. Were they reliable, respected members? Did they have any behavioral issues?**

He was a new member, very engaged and enthusiastic. He spent a lot of time at the department, both supervised and unsupervised. He also responded to a majority of the calls.

**How long were they setting fires before they were caught?**

Fires were set for four months before he was caught.

**How many fires were set and what were the primary targets?**

Initially grass fires and hay bales were set and then a large stack of hay bales. There was a failed attempt on the community hall and a vehicle. A successful fire was set to an historic community country church, which led to his apprehension and prosecution.

**What kind of damage resulted from the fire(s)?**

There was a total loss of 20 tons of hay and a total loss of the historic chapel.

**Were there injuries or loss of life due to the fires they set?**

No.

**Did any members come to you with concerns? If so, was any action taken?**

No, however the fire chief and I came to share the same suspicions around the same time.

**Did you personally have any concerns? If so, did you share them?**

I had concerns only after learning of the church fire. I immediately shared them with the chief, and then we both contacted the sheriff's office to take over the investigation. I had two very large concerns. The first was for firefighter safety if another larger incident were to occur before we had evidence for successful prosecution, and secondly for the arsonist's safety if word got out he was responsible prior to apprehension. There was a significant amount of community anger that could have put his life in jeopardy.

**Did your department have any preventive measures in place addressing firefighter arson? If so, please describe them.**

We did background checks through the sheriff's office. I learned afterwards that in this case, juvenile records would have been sealed and not found in the search. Thus, we raised the eligible age to apply to the fire department to 21.

**Describe the impact this has had on you and your department. How has the department's relationship with its members, the community, the media, and the local government been affected?**

I was personally strongly affected. Emotions of betrayal, anger, concern for the individual and the department, fear of public backlash, and a sense of "why didn't I see this" were present in me and other department members. This was a new, growing rural fire district. Up until the arson, it was progressing very well. After the arson, we lost membership and never recovered. The momentum was lost and it remains a nominal organization to this day. While the media was fair, and proactive, honest communication was held with the community, the damage was greater internally.

**Any additional information you would like to include:**

Having done my EFOP research project on firefighter arson after this event, I learned a significant amount of preventative measures that each fire chief should take with new recruits. I believe every department should have a standard screening for potential negative members. The work done by Rebecca Doley in Australia shows there are some positive indicators that, if employed, could protect the department and community from very negative consequences. My research showed firefighter arson to be more prevalent in the volunteer department; however with a changing culture, it may become more evident in the career fire service in the future.

trust broken. Since most fire departments rely on some form of financial community support – through tax revenue, surcharges, or community donations – affected departments may struggle to maintain their financial stability. Rebuilding the relationship between a department and its community can be a daunting task. It may take years to reestablish a favorable reputation, and in some cases, a department never fully recovers.

Perhaps even greater than the impact that firefighter arson has on the community is the impact it has on the department itself. Not only does firefighter arson put fellow firefighters and emergency responders in danger, it is also likely to create an environment of distrust and suspicion within the ranks. The internal crisis that follows the betrayal of arson can be even more crippling than the external pressure being placed on the department. Some members may have feelings of distrust toward their fellow firefighters and department leadership. Members often have to deal with being associated with criminal behavior simply for belonging to the same department and are subjected to scrutiny and suspicion by others. Every member of the affected department now must wear the stigma created by the firefighter arsonist.



Recruitment and retention efforts may also be affected when a department is under a cloud of suspicion and distrust. Potential members may be discouraged by the negative publicity surrounding the department, while current members may leave due to embarrassment or disgust. In addition, the internal distrust and divisiveness can tear apart a department. This is especially true when the offender is a relative (son, daughter, or nephew) of a senior or executive member of the fire department. When no action is taken it creates distrust and appears as preferential treatment; when acted upon too early it can split a family or destroy friendships.

Many times the fire chief and department leadership may be the most affected when a member is accused of arson. Not only are they faced with distrust from the public and elected officials, but they may also be met with resistance from members of their own department. Some may blame the chief for not noticing strange or suspicious behavior within the ranks. However, as Huff (1994) notes, even if a chief does have concerns about a member they may be reluctant to air their concerns publicly without definitive proof for fear that they may alienate their members if the suspicions proved to be false. The loss of credibility is an issue for department leadership regardless if allegations against a member are ultimately proven or not. The fear of being wrong and ruining relationships – and possibly careers – can be enough motivation for a chief to remain silent. The alternative is not particularly appealing either. If the chief's suspicions are in fact confirmed, then their department will likely face intense scrutiny in the court of public opinion (USFA, 2003). Thus, it is of the utmost importance that fire service leaders, both volunteer and career, take this issue seriously and develop a collective approach to address this issue. After all, this is an issue that affects the reputation of the fire service as a whole, not just the unfortunate departments that had a member arrested.

The following sections will address conducting investigations of potential firefighter arsonists, preventing incidents of firefighter arson, and recommendations for the future mitigation of this issue.



# Investigating Firefighter Arson

Data collection is crucial when investigating an arson case, and using mapping techniques to identify trends and patterns may prove to be valuable. Communication and coordination between all involved agencies – especially if incidents migrate across jurisdiction boundaries – is also paramount. Prompt information sharing will lend itself to the timely apprehension of the suspect(s). Creating an arson task force or a joint operation center will bring representatives from the various agencies together and allow for collaboration (Martinez, 2004). Investigators should notify the responding department when arson is suspected and an investigation is being launched.

This type of information sharing may have an added benefit. In a discussion for this report, Suffolk County (NY) Arson Task Force Coordinator Brett Martinez recalled a case where the fire department chief was notified of an impending investigation without mentioning their suspicions of a firefighter being involved. Martinez noted, “The chief decided to bring the information to their general meeting and suddenly the fires stopped. There was no evidence to point toward any subjects, but once the chief announced the investigation it was safe to say that the offender was a firefighter or someone related/affiliated with firefighters...I am pretty sure the chief believed the same thing we did and wanted to stop it before it became a black eye for their department.”

Identifying trends and warning signs does not necessarily require a dedicated fire investigation team, expensive computer software, or advanced training – though they can make it much easier. In many cases identifying patterns simply requires a fire chief or investigator to get into a few easy and inexpensive habits. The first is to investigate the origin and cause of each and every fire. Since research has consistently documented that many firefighter arsonists start with small ‘nuisance’ fires (such as a trash can, a pile of leaves, or the like) before graduating to larger and more dangerous fires, we need to be diligent about completing at least a cursory investigation of every fire regardless of the size (Huff, 1994).

## Fire Investigator Questionnaire

**Name:** Daniel Hebert

**Title:** Special Agent

**Agency:** Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives

**State:** Louisiana

### **Describe investigative tactics that are especially helpful when working firefighter arson cases.**

I have investigated fires for 25 years. In that time, I have arrested approximately 30 firesetting firefighters.

It is very important to work with trusted investigative colleagues. Interviewing/interrogation played vital roles in virtually every investigation involving firefighters. Profiling was also important, as was recognizing the patterns and progressions of the fires, i.e. grass fires, dumpster fires, abandoned properties, and vacant properties.

### **Once arson is determined to be the cause of a fire, what steps should an investigator take to confirm or rule out firefighter involvement?**

Be aware of run rosters. If it is suspected that a firefighter is involved, it is rare that they would set a fire that they would not respond to.

### **Based on your experience with cases, what are some characteristics (either with the suspects or the circumstances surrounding the fire) that are unique to firefighter arson?**

Age. It is critical that we educate the young firefighters. In my experience, I don't believe that I have arrested a firefighter over 30, and in most cases it was 17-21. It was very common for the firefighter to report the fire, but if not, they were usually the first to arrive.

The second habit is to always document and request a statement from the 911 caller(s) about what they saw and from what vantage point. This can help establish the origin, determine timings, and identify potential leads in fire investigations of all types. Research has also noted that oftentimes firefighter arsonists will call 911 to report the fire they just started – either to ensure that they were able to participate in the suppression effort or to ensure that the fire did not get (further) “out of control” (Hinds-Aldrich, 2011b). Even when some firefighter arsonists attempted to report the fire(s) anonymously, some raised the suspicions of dispatchers by referring to them by first name, by using fire department codes, and even leaving their fire pager on high volume so the dispatcher could hear it in the background. Ultimately, this strategy can also pay dividends in other investigations as 911 callers may have additional observations that can aid in traditional fire investigations.

The third habit is to always document the names and times of the first arriving firefighters. This is not intended to cast suspicion on the fire department; in fact, this information can be important in fire investigations of all types. As Martinez (2004) notes:

*Fire and police personnel rotate constantly and rarely work the same shift or time frame that coincides with the suspected activity. Unless the outgoing shift advises the oncoming shift of the activity that occurred on the last shift, the odds of spotting consistencies in a timely manner are diminished. Unless someone collects the incident information and places it into a database where you can search for patterns, most cases of serial activity will go unnoted. Without data analysis, related serial events may not be recognized for months or years.*

This can help in multiple ways. First, in normal investigations it is important to note in writing who was first on scene and what they saw, when, where, etc. They may notice that “things didn’t seem to add up,” “homeowner was acting strange,” “the flames were confined to the ‘B-C’ [Left-Rear] corner when we arrived,” and so on. Second, it will help identify patterns where particular firefighters were always on the first arriving apparatus. For example, it may help identify a particular firefighter (or firefighters) who are repeatedly the first on the scene regardless of the time of day or their distance from the station or the incident.

Relatedly, in departments with electronic door locks or where each firefighter is assigned a take-home portable radio, investigators can begin to jot down when they entered the fire station or how long it took between the time they signed on the radio ‘en route’ and when they arrived at the station or on scene. Many perceptive firefighters pick up on this already, as was noted in several recent cases where firefighters who lived nearby confronted another firefighter who lived miles away from the fire station about how he was able to arrive so quickly in the early hours of the morning.

These simple habits can provide investigators with important additional information that may highlight emerging trends. To make sense of these trends it is helpful to analyze the data further, remembering that it does not have to be terribly complex or expensive to be useful.

The analysis of arson trends is important because it can help identify (or clear) potential suspects as well as tailor the investigative strategies to the particular case. Yet, sometimes trends may not be readily identifiable based upon investigative intuition alone, even among experienced fire investigators, because the fires may cross jurisdictional boundaries, shift patterns, or the like. To identify patterns, fire investigators and fire service leaders should attempt to map or otherwise aggregate the data based on time of day, day of week, type of target, or any other pertinent variable. Many police departments have “crime mapping” departments that may be able to assist with computer programs that can help organize and visualize this data; yet more rudimentary analysis can be done with a first-due map and color-coded pushpins. Identifying patterns after the fact is important, but it is also important to hopefully prevent firefighters from setting fires in the first place.

Finally, the use of technology should not be overlooked, especially if a suspect or suspects has been identified. Aside from the typical forensic services offered by various crime labs, other technology can assist in investigating a case of suspected firefighter arson. Cell phone records and tracking can provide a person’s whereabouts during a certain date and time. Localization may occur either via radio signals between (several) radio towers of the network and the phone, or simply via GPS. Additionally, something as simple as looking up a person of interest on social media sites can also be utilized. These sites are increasingly being examined in criminal investigations with gathered information being used successfully by law enforcement officials to prosecute offenders of various crimes.

# Preventing Firefighter Arson

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**Firefighter arson can be prevented in many cases. Completing criminal background checks on potential recruits can help departments make informed decisions when accepting new members. In lieu of a background check, applicants can be required to sign an affidavit claiming they have never been convicted of arson. While these methods are useful, they are not foolproof since many firefighter arsonists do not have criminal records. Education may be the most effective tool for preventing firefighter arson. Many firefighters are unaware of the definition of arson and the legal consequences of firesetting. Department leaders should communicate openly and honestly with their members and adopt a zero-tolerance policy.**

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## **Profiling and Screening**

The profiles have occasionally noted the firefighter arsonists may have had ‘run-ins’ with the law or an otherwise checkered past. Naturally the logical response would be to implement criminal records checks to ascertain an applicant’s criminal history. This is an important and necessary response. However, it should also spark a broader discussion with the fire service about whether the fire service has any role in helping young men and women who might have gotten started down the wrong path to get back on the ‘straight-and-narrow.’ While some argue that the “fire service is not a solution for families or individuals to help these ‘problem children’” (Murphy and Murphy, 2010), others believe that the fire service does have an important societal role to play. Regardless, while some firefighter arsonists were among those who “joined the fire service ...to build character and develop a sense of values despite demonstrating a lack of these traits as evidenced by frequent run-ins with the law or problems at home” (Murphy and Murphy 2010), there are also likely many thousands of honorable firefighters that share this checked background but now are upstanding citizens and would never consider re-breaking this trust.

While criminal records checks are a vital and necessary part of a fire department’s “due diligence” to ensure applicants are not convicted arsonists or sex offenders, they may not be sufficient. Moreover, fire departments should also

establish where the acceptable criminal record threshold is, if any, and, at the very least, be sure to emphasize with these applicants there is zero-tolerance for any illegal or inappropriate behavior – especially setting any fire.

The presumption here is that firefighter arsonists are arsonists, or at least unsavory characters, who later become firefighters. Yet, as Hinds-Aldrich (2011a; 2011b) discusses at length, many times firefighter arsonists are firefighters who then become arsonists. Said another way, many of the applicant screening techniques (background checks, psychological testing, etc.) are intended to identify “bad” people who want to become firefighters, yet many of the firefighters arrested for arson had no previous criminal record (Huff, 1994) or were widely recognized as among the most helpful, dedicated, and trust-worthy members of their departments.

What is worse, Hinds-Aldrich (2011a; 2011b) argues that this can be referred to as “occupational overzealousness,” whereby some firefighters set fires for the purpose of providing training opportunities for themselves and others, to remove crime-ridden vacant buildings, or to reduce brush and undergrowth, thinking that the “ends” justify the “means.” These model firefighters turned arsonists require a different approach as Martinez (2010) notes:

*An additional method is needed to address ... the offender who no one would ever believe would be an arsonist. These include individuals who come from “good stock,” were highly motivated, and appear to be a great asset to the department. They are action-oriented ... offenders who believe that setting a fire is not a bad thing or is good for training. To help prevent these firefighters from going down the path of an arsonist, a different approach is necessary.*

Even though background checks can be ineffective in some cases, they can still be valuable. At the very least, criminal checks can help a department make a well-informed decision when accepting a new recruit. If departments do not have access to background checks, they should consider adding criminal history questions to department applications and/or have recruits sign an affidavit claiming they have never been convicted of arson. These methods are not foolproof, and the best approach to prevent firefighter arsonists from setting fires in the first place remains a matter of some debate. Yet, the best approach must at least include



an educational component to ensure all firefighters – new and old – realize that there is zero tolerance for firesetting.

## Education

Fire service leaders must acknowledge that firefighter arson is a serious issue that is affecting departments across the country. Departments must adopt a zero-tolerance policy and, at the very least, openly discuss the issue of firefighter arson and effectively communicate the legal and personal consequences of setting fires. Department leaders should become familiar with the definition of arson and the legal punishment for arson in their state.

Fire service leaders also need to be honest with recruits. The realities of being a firefighter may not match the image portrayed in popular culture. Included in the job description should be the honest statement about the actual call volume and the types of calls, as well as the amount of downtime and the potential for boredom. The fire service must take some responsibility for sustaining the myth of the excitement involved in being a firefighter and ‘slaying the dragon’ (Murphy and Murphy, 2010).

Education about the seriousness and repercussions of setting fires and honesty about the call volume and the potential for boredom are among some of the best ways to prevent firefighter arson. Recruits and department members need to be aware of what constitutes arson and how arsonists are prosecuted within that state. Young firefighters may not be aware that in most states a structure does not have to burn for there to be grounds for charging someone with arson. Several states have statutes that can prosecute offenders for smoke damage, blistering, and the destruction of external surfaces. State statutes lay out the criteria for what is considered arson and can vary widely from state-to-state. Arson is categorized into three degrees of severity based on the target. In most (but not all) cases, first-degree arson includes homes, schools, and churches; second-degree arson includes unoccupied structures and vehicles; and third-degree arson includes personal property.

Firefighters, especially young firefighters, should also be informed that if they are an accomplice (such as being a “look out,” driving the car, or even being aware of what is going on but not saying anything to their Chief or commanding officers), they can be charged with arson and sent to prison as well, even if they did not physically set the fire.

Firefighters or new recruits may be unaware of the severity of arson, especially if they are burning a “low-risk target” such as a dumpster or a vacant or abandoned building. Some firefighters seem to set fires with “good intentions,” unaware that their actions could be prosecuted.

As noted previously, Hinds-Aldrich (2011a; 2011b) highlights cases in which firefighters apparently set fires for training purposes, to keep fire suppression skills sharp, or to eliminate problematic buildings, thinking that their actions were helpful or beneficial to the department or the town. It is important to be clear with all firefighters that firesetting, even if well intentioned, is illegal, immoral, and unacceptable.

Some may think there is a fine line between igniting a legal, permitted, and prepared “prescribed burn” to a field to control the spread of ladder fuels and an illegal, undocumented, and arbitrary arson fire to a similar field for similar purposes but without proper permission or safeguards in place. While the outcome may be the same, and the fire may develop the same, the outcome for the person(s) involved will be vastly different. We need to make sure young firefighters (as well as older firefighters) understand this vital difference. We cannot afford to leave any ambiguity here.

Department leaders should also educate members on the potential punishments for committing arson while emphasizing the damage that will be done to the offender’s family, the department, and the community. Several initiatives and programs have worked to educate firefighters on the severity and consequences of arson. Young firefighters, in particular, may not appreciate the impact that being caught will have on their ability to keep a job in the future, the shame it will bring to their families, or the amount of restitution (potentially hundreds of thousands of dollars) they may be forced to pay. Amazingly, in the *Hero to Zero – Firefighter Arsonist* presentation, Trooper Dave Klitsch of the Pennsylvania State Police notes how many of the young firefighters he arrested over the years were distraught to find out in the interrogation room that they could never serve as a firefighter in Pennsylvania again once convicted of arson and related offenses. We must be sure to make it clear to our firefighters that setting a fire will likely mean they can never serve again, an obvious but vital component of any educational program.

Several education programs have been developed at the state and local level in an attempt to prevent firefighter arson. The following are brief descriptions of three programs that were designed specifically to deal with this issue.

### **Suffolk County New York: Firefighter Turned Arsonist**

Between 1991 and 1992, Suffolk County, NY, suffered a series of violent serial arsons in three separate communities. In response to these incidents, the Suffolk County Police Arson Squad and Fire Marshal’s Office developed the training program “Firefighter Turned Arsonist” in 1994. The program includes a lecture and video that highlights

the consequences of setting fires and how committing arson negatively impacts the firesetter, his or her family, the department, and the community. All county recruits must participate in the program. A uniformed fire investigator presents the material to the recruit class and spends time emphasizing the penalties associated with arson. The program also includes a component for fire investigators and provides an overview of the tools designed to identify, track, and apprehend firefighters who become arsonists.

Even though no official analysis has been completed to measure the success of the program, it has been considered a success by investigators. In a discussion for this report, Suffolk County Arson Task Force Coordinator Brett Martinez stressed that the number of incidents have declined significantly since the program has been put in place. Additionally, he noted that the county has not had fatal fires or large structural losses since the combined education and fire tracking program has been implanted.

#### **Pennsylvania Association of Arson Investigators: Hero to Zero – Firefighter Arsonist**

The Pennsylvania Association of Arson Investigators recently implemented a program to address and prevent firefighter arson. The three-hour program aims to decrease the frequency of incidents through awareness. Topics include motive, cause/effect, profiling, legal statutes, and prevention. Developed by Pennsylvania State Trooper David Klitsch, the *Hero to Zero – Firefighter Arsonist* program is inspiring other states to adopt similar awareness methods.

The *Hero to Zero - Firefighter Arsonist* program is a blend of PowerPoint slides, videos, and discussion. The course covers the following topics: 1) addressing the problem, 2) motives of firesetting firefighters, 3) effect of firefighter arson on the community and the fire service, 4) embarrassment to the family and the fire company, 5) understanding arson statutes, 6) basic profile of the firefighter arsonist, 7) the fire service's responsibility in preventing firefighter arsonists, and 8) preventive screening and background checks (2010 USFA).

As Trooper Klitsch recently commented (USFA, 2010):

*Firefighter arson is an unpleasant reality of the fire service both here and abroad. The Hero to Zero – Firefighter Arsonist program brings this unpleasant topic to the forefront of the fire service through an attention-grabbing three-hour presentation. This training program has been credited with uncovering cases of firefighter arsonist since its inception. I suspect we will continue to see a rise in firefighters being arrested for setting fires as the fire service goes through a*

*period of 'cleansing' as a result of the information gathered through this program and the action taken by the students (firefighters) in identifying these criminal actions."*

#### **Secrets in the Firehouse**

One of the most effective firefighter arson prevention strategies is to hear about the topic from those who intimately know the impact of firefighter arson. In fact, when Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives Special Agent Dan Hebert presents his popular program *Secrets in the Firehouse*, he is often joined by a man he once arrested – convicted firefighter arsonist Steven Specht. Specht's message is both clear and powerful:

*My name is Stephen Specht and I am a former firefighter for the St. Tammany Parish Louisiana Fire District 7. I want to thank you all for having me here today. I was asked to be a part of this presentation of firesetting firemen. I was asked to participate because I am a firesetting fireman, or at least I was.*

*I became a firefighter because I enjoyed helping people and enjoyed the respect that came with being a firefighter. My family has a long history of being volunteer firemen and remains in this field today.*

*I was proud to be associated with the fire service and, although highly unlikely, I would love the opportunity to put my past behind me and return to the fire service. Because I still want to help my fellow firefighters I am here today before you.*

*I want you to learn from me how this can happen to firemen in your state. Maybe my being here will help you catch the firesetting firemen that are actively committing arson in your area, because trust me, they are out there. More importantly though, maybe I can show you how I fell into this cycle of arson and hopefully it can help you prevent some young fireman from ruining their lives like I did mine.*

Specht answers questions at the end of the presentation and is often met with a variety of emotions including anger, sympathy, and compassion (refer to page 13 to read more about Steven Specht and his story). He is eager to right the wrongs of his past and prevent other fire service members from following down the same path. The strength of this program is the strong unified message these two former adversaries now share – this is a significant problem that we cannot afford to ignore.

# Recommendations

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There is little question that firefighter arson is a long-standing, complex problem facing the fire service. This report has dissected the problem while offering a critique of existing preventative and investigative methods. All future firefighter arson incidents cannot be eradicated, but their number can be greatly reduced if the proper steps are taken. The following recommendations are based on the findings of this report.

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## **Acknowledge the Problem**

The fire service and fire service organizations need to confront the problem of firefighter arson head-on and be willing to openly discuss the issue. Firefighter arson is unfortunately not a new problem, and with recent research documenting over 100 American firefighters arrested every year it can no longer be ignored. While the topic of firefighter arson is an understandably uncomfortable topic for the fire service, it threatens the credibility and reputation of the whole fire service, not just the departments in the spotlight. If we hope to affect meaningful national change, fire service leaders must first acknowledge that the problem exists, it is preventable, and it is unacceptable.

## **Collect Official Firefighter Arson Data Nationally**

The collection of national data on firefighter arson cases has been a consistent recommendation from nearly every study in the past twenty years. With over 100 firefighter arsonist cases per year being reported in the American newspapers, it is absolutely essential that we heed these recommendations. The NFVC has developed an online tracking tool to help fill this void, yet what is needed is the collection of official national statistics. A firefighter arson data field should be incorporated into the Bombing and Arson Tracking System database managed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS), and the Uniformed Crime Reports (UCR) to account for the primary official arson data repositories. Moreover, given the significance of the issue the development of a supplementary report much like the NFIRS Supplemental Forms or the Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR) would allow for more detailed analysis of cases.

## **Develop a National Firefighter Arson Prevention Strategy**

In order to bring this topic out of the shadows and engage in meaningful debate, we need to develop a coherent national strategy to address this issue. Calling for action is unfortunately not sufficient. We need to develop a national awareness campaign and educational strategy that acknowledges that this is a problem and identifies concrete steps to address it. This requires both national leadership and even some national resources—even in a time of shrinking budgets. We cannot afford to ignore this problem as every case further erodes both our public support and financial stability.

The National Fire Academy (NFA) offers an important forum that can bring fire chiefs, fire investigators, and fire supervisors together regularly to help spread this message across the country. As the national leader in developing model curriculum, the NFA has an important role to play in developing a national firefighter arson prevention framework for agencies across the country to adopt.

## **Adopt Current Best Practice Approaches to Firefighter Arson Prevention Training**

The firefighter arson awareness programs in practice across the country serve as excellent examples that other jurisdictions should model. Moreover, they also illustrate that by acknowledging the problem publically we do not necessarily further jeopardize our public support—rather they illustrate to the public that we hold ourselves in high esteem and will not tire in our efforts to maintain this positive historical reputation.

## **Conduct Background Checks and Applicant Screenings**

Fire departments should require all new recruits to complete a criminal background check. Background checks are not foolproof when it comes to preventing firefighter arsonists, but they do provide valuable information about the character and integrity of new applicants. Fire departments should have a comprehensive application process for new recruits. If background checks are not financially feasible, consider alternatives such as adding criminal history questions to department applications and/or have recruits sign an affidavit swearing that they have never been convicted of arson. Although a background check will not guarantee that your members will not set fires, it may help



demonstrate your “due diligence” in terms of defending your department from potential civil liability if a member sets a fire.

### **Collect and Analyze Incident Data at the Local Level**

Fire departments can play an instrumental role in collecting and analyzing data during an arson investigation. Diligently keeping track of calls and noting an increase in a certain type of fire or call volume may help identify a potential arson series early before an arsonist begins setting larger and more dangerous fires. In particular, a fire chief can adopt several simple practices that can aid both traditional fire investigations as well as suspected firefighter arson cases. First, always document the origin and cause of every fire within your jurisdiction. While this may seem wasted effort in a time of limited resources it is essential to document the origin, cause and location of even small fires as many firefighter arsonists begin with small fires before moving to larger fires. Second, request a statement from the 911 caller(s) to record the incident from their point of view, they may have pertinent information and often firefighter arsonists also call in the fires they set. Finally, the fire chief should document the names and times of the firefighters arriving first on the scene. These firefighters may have noticed something strange or out of place. Additionally, suspicions could be raised if the same firefighter(s) are consistently the first on the scene (regardless of the time of day or their distance from the station).

### **Adopt Zero-Tolerance in Practice and Policy**

Fire service leaders should make it clear to all of their members where the line is with regards to setting fires. There should be a written, communicated, and affirmed zero-tolerance policy that clearly states that firesetting is not acceptable. That said, the policy should clearly specify the circumstances in which setting fires can be done (i.e. training fires that comply with all of the relevant NFPA standards, prescribed burns that include all of the required paperwork and documentation, etc.). This will not only ensure that firefighters know where the line is in terms of firefighter arson, but also may help reduce the potential for injuries or liabilities in terms of approved fires. Yet like any policy, it must not reside simply on the shelf; it should be reinforced and refreshed regularly through annual training sessions for new and old members alike.

### **Empower Your Members to Take a Stand**

Firefighters as a whole are disgusted by the thought that some firefighters are willing to risk their lives and the lives of others by setting fires. This goes against everything the fire service stands for. We should tap into that sentiment by not only talking about this topic occasionally but also

reminding firefighters that when they “See Something, Say Something.” This strategy does not only apply to homeland security it also applies to firehouse security. If they have suspicions about another member, they should be encouraged to inform their chief or another leader (even if they prefer to do so anonymously). While the bond between firefighters is strong, when a firefighter sets a fire they have already broken the bond. Investigate and encourage firefighters and other leaders to document suspicions even if they do not have any proof. We cannot afford to wait until our suspicions are proven with deadly consequences.

In conclusion, firefighter arson is an issue that threatens the reputation and credibility of the fire service. These recommendations reflect the need for a coordinated approach that recognizes the complexity of the problem. Even one firefighter arsonist, volunteer or career, is one too many. Now is the time for fire service leaders, organizations, and agencies to come together and speak with one voice. Now is the time for action.



# Appendix: Firefighter Arson in the News

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Firefighter arson occurs across the country and affects departments of all types and sizes. This section takes a look at some recent cases profiled in the media. These cases are a sample of the 100+ firefighter arson arrests per year. Firefighter arsonists and their motivations vary across a wide spectrum. Whether volunteer, career, paid-per-call, wildland, junior, new recruit, chief, troublemaker, or model firefighter, arsonists come from a variety of backgrounds and set fires for a variety of reasons. It is tempting to separate the black and white from a thousand shades of grey, but it is often unrealistic when dealing with such a complex issue.

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## **Boswell Volunteer Fire Department: Pennsylvania**

A junior firefighter with the Boswell Volunteer Fire Department allegedly set his own house on fire in January 2011 because, according to the state police's investigation, "he wanted to be a hero." Kenneth Beeman, 18, was a new junior firefighter with the department. According to police, Beeman had a friend drive him to his home because he "had a feeling something bad was going to happen." Once at the house, he used his grandmother's cigarette lighter to ignite an object in the basement and then ran outside telling his friend to dial 911. Neighbors – a father and son who were firefighters – ran next door and extinguished the blaze. No injuries were reported. Beeman reportedly gave a statement to police that implicated himself in the fire (McDonough, 2011).

## **Houston County Fire Department: Tennessee**

Firefighters Robert Taylor Richardson, Michael Brooks, Jeremy Mackens, and Daryl Buttons were charged with setting multiple fires, including the one that burned their own fire station to the ground. Richardson, whose father is a volunteer at the same department, and his friends each had two years of experience in the fire service. The Houston County Sheriff discussed the arrests during a press conference and revealed that the firefighters were acting out of boredom and wanting to experience the "thrill of the fire." The tight-knit community was shocked by the

arrest of four of their volunteers. The fire station has been rebuilt since the fire but the emotional rebuilding for the department and the community has only just begun (WSMV Nashville, 2011).

## **Cameron Gardens Volunteer Fire Department: Texas**

Kyle Harmon, a firefighter with the Cameron Gardens Volunteer Fire Department and son of the fire chief, wanted to leave his job one day in the fall of 2005, so the seven-year veteran started a fire. The call came in and Harmon left work to respond. The wildland fire spread across more than 2,000 acres as fire departments from across North Texas responded to battle the blaze. Volunteer firefighter Dwight Murphy sustained burns to 25 percent of his body during the response effort. Harmon was arrested in the fall of 2010 and admitted to setting several fires, including the one that severely injured his friend. Murphy spent more than two months in the hospital being treated for his burns and continues to have issues as a result of his injuries. Harmon was charged with arson with injury or death, a first-degree felony, and his total bond was set at \$1 million (Langdon, 2010).

## **Mawbry Volunteer Fire Department: Tennessee**

Police arrested a former volunteer firefighter and his wife for allegedly setting their home on fire to collect insurance money. James Russ' arrest did not surprise neighbor and former fire service colleague Elizabeth Lewis. Lewis recalled one night on a fire call when Russ said, "Well if my house was to burn, let it burn." Russ was charged with three counts of arson and insurance fraud (America, 2010).

## **Chicago Fire Department: Illinois**

Lieutenant Jeffrey Boyle, a 25-year veteran with the Chicago Fire Department, was charged with four felony counts of arson in 2005. Known to many as "Matches," Boyle blamed stress for driving him to set the fires. According to Lt. Wayne Micek of the police Bomb and Arson Squad, Boyle indicated that "all of the sudden something would trigger – an unknown emotion would trigger him that he would want to go set a fire." He also indicated that problems with his girlfriend and gambling may have played a role in triggering his urge to set fires. Boyle was charged with eight counts of felony arson and was a suspect in multiple unsolved arson cases (NBC5, 2005).

### Parma Fire Department: Idaho

Firefighter Clyde Dewayne Holmes, Jr., 23, was sentenced to 72 months in federal prison for six felony counts of arson involving public lands. Holmes set six separate fires that burned approximately 1,200 acres in 2007 and anonymously called in two of the fires. The official case brief, *United States v. Holmes* (2011), provided more insight:

*Several factors added to Holmes's blameworthiness. He was a volunteer firefighter, and although no special expertise contributed to or was needed to set the fires, people expect firefighters to fight fires, not start them. And he lied when he was caught, sending the authorities down several paths that might have led to charges against innocent people. He gave truck descriptions, license plate numbers, and other identifiers that could have landed someone innocent in federal prison instead of himself. Fortunately, he literally*

*left tracks, tire tracks, pointing to him, reported the fires anonymously from locations establishing that he was probably the person who called 911, his truck was seen by a BLM officer leaving the area where the fires had been reported only thirty seconds before a new fire was discovered, and he set the fires in locations all within a six mile circle and at times suggesting that he set them all in the afternoon after he got off work and before he got home for dinner.*

Holmes was also ordered to pay \$155,881.36 in damages and firefighting costs (United States Attorney's Office District of Idaho, 2009).

### Chadbourn Fire Department: North Carolina

Twenty-year-old Daniel Wayne Scott, a firefighter with the Chadbourn Fire Department, was indicted along with two other accomplices for setting fire to the Carolina Tire



DO NOT CROSS

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Sales company in 2009. The blaze burned for four days and resulted in several injuries. One hundred and fifty firefighters, including Scott, from 36 departments responded to the fire. Scott would be paid for fighting the fire, and the money collected was to be split with his codefendants (Brooks, 2010). Scott pleaded guilty in early 2011 and faces a maximum of 40 years in prison (Associated Press, (2011a).

#### **Hollis Crossroads Fire Department: Alabama**

Three Hollis Crossroads firefighters were arrested on arson charges for several fires set in 2010. Michael Adrian Campbell, 19, Tyler Moore, 18, and Kevin Johnson, 18, were arrested in connection to a fire that destroyed a vacant 1850s era home. Moore, who was once described as one of the department's leaders, was also arrested in connection with a separate barn fire. Firefighters immediately suspected arson when they responded to the fire that engulfed the 1850s home since no one had lived in the structure for years. Members of the department quickly thought Moore was responsible since he arrived at the early-morning scene only three minutes after the 911 call went out. Investigators were able to match the voice from the anonymous 911 call to Moore's radio transmission when he arrived on the scene (Anniston Star, 2011).

#### **Union Hose Company Engine 86: New York**

Trent Bronner, 21, was arrested and charged with second degree arson and a B felony after setting a fire that destroyed two homes. Bronner was a decorated three-year member of the department. He was extremely active with the department and was listed as the top alarm responder during 2010-2011. Days after setting and responding to the fire, Bronner posted this to his page on Facebook.

*When a man becomes a fireman his greatest act of bravery has been accomplished. What he does after that is all in the line of work. Firemen never die, they just burn forever in the hearts of the people whose lives they saved. When the first tones go off, and the first page goes out. The whistle starts to blow and many people go put their lives on the line to save yours. Many of these men and women are leaving their families knowing that they may never see them again. If you are a firefighter, know one, or love one post this and show them that you're proud of what they do!!*



Bronner had no previous criminal record, and his actions have rattled the department. Fire Chief John Korzelius lamented, "To have one of our own...This is really the ultimate sin for the fire department" (Roach, 2011).

#### **Wilton Volunteer Fire Department: Arkansas**

Firefighter Zachery York, 19, was arrested for setting a grass fire in Little River County, Arkansas. York is also being investigated in several other similar fires set in the county. No structures were targeted and no one was injured or threatened. The county sheriff's office began to suspect York when they realized that he was at the scene of all of the grass fires. York's phone was also used to report each incident. He has been terminated from the fire department (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, 2011).

#### **Thornton Rural Fire Protection District: California**

Brian Patrick Schneider, 27, was arrested for setting fire to a house, recreational vehicle, and a shed. Schneider used fire department flares to start the blaze and later responded to the fire. Schneider was a firefighter for one year and had no criminal record. He also worked as a paramedic. He was distraught when being questioned by the police and commented that he "just messed up." Schneider was the third firefighter arrested for arson from the Thornton Rural Fire Protection District over the last decade (Associated Press, 2005).

### **Jacksonville Fire Department Fire Station 50: Florida**

Bruce Edward Jones, 31, was suspended without pay from the Jacksonville Fire Department after being charged with aggravated stalking and two counts of arson. Jones was stalking a woman and was on duty when he used generic cell phones to direct the two car fires that destroyed the stalking victim's car and one other vehicle. The phones used to make the calls were found in his turnout gear at the station. Jones had previously asked two others to set the fires for \$200, but they refused (Treen, 2011).

### **LaFayette Fire Department: Georgia**

LaFayette firefighter Marvin Chase, 32, confessed to police that he has set over 30 fires in empty homes over the past five years. Chase reportedly "got a thrill" out of setting the fires and was also paid a certain amount of money per structure fire that the volunteers responded to while on duty (Fire Department Network News, 2011).

### **Bexley Volunteer Fire Department: Mississippi**

Firefighter Joshua Daniel Easter, 32, is facing state charges in relation to seven fires, and is facing federal charges after setting fire to federal housing. He has also been charged with child molestation. Easter was a firefighter for about six months. He had an extensive criminal record in Arkansas, including convictions for arson, writing hot checks, and commercial burglary (Associated Press, 2011b).



### **Presque Isle Fire Department: Maine**

Timothy J. MacFarline, 25, pleaded guilty in the fire that destroyed the Northeast Packaging Company warehouse in Presque Isle. MacFarline was an employee at the warehouse and a member of the call staff at the fire department. A joint investigation between the fire department, the police department, the Maine State Police, and the State Fire Marshal's Office resulted in MacFarline's arrest. Their efforts were aided by security camera footage at the scene (Lynds, 2010).

### **Forest Lake Fire Department: Minnesota**

John Berken, 42, was arrested after being charged with arson in a 2009 fire that burned nearly 2,000 acres. Berken helped to fight the fire with 200 other firefighters over two days. Witnesses saw something shot out of Berken's vehicle, followed by flashing colored lights and then a fire. Berken was once described by the Forest Lake mayor as an "exemplary citizen" and was awarded a Lifesaving Award (Star Tribune, 2011).

### **Allendale Volunteer Fire Department: New Jersey**

The son of a former fire chief was arrested for allegedly setting fire to an abandoned house in Upper Saddle River, New Jersey. Brian Alvarez, 23, called in the fire in the early morning and responded to the blaze. He told police he was driving when he noticed the fire. The fire was intentionally set in multiple areas in and around the house. Police are investigating other fires that Alvarez reported, including vehicle and brush fires in other towns (Weinberger, 2011).

### **Sophia City Volunteer Fire Department: West Virginia**

Douglas Howard Gauger, 21, applied with the Sophia City Volunteer Fire Department in West Virginia after serving as a volunteer in Pennsylvania. Gauger had a clean background check but was unable to provide the necessary paperwork to prove he held Pro-Board certification in Pennsylvania. He was serving on a probationary basis when he was arrested as a fugitive of justice. Gauger was a suspect in several arsons in Pennsylvania and left the state in the middle of the investigation. Sophia City's chief officers were informed of the investigation and were asked to monitor his behavior. He is being investigated in West Virginia to determine if he had any involvement in any arson reports filed while he was in the state (Van Pelt, 2010).

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