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Arsonists in California and New York: a tentative look

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A nonrandom sample of 90 arsonists in California and New York was interviewed for the California Department of Forestry from 1977 to 1979. About two-thirds of them were in prison for arson, and the others were in mental hospitals. The 90 interviewees were mostly unmarried males ranging in age from 17 to 51 years. Survey results show that those who set their first arson fire at a young age tended to set many fires, and had more arson convictions and repeated visits to mental hospitals than those who set their first fire at an older age.

Retrieval Terms: arson, incendiarism, fire prevention, law enforcement, fire investigation, California, New York

Research on arsonists—their backgrounds and characteristics—is scant. A report about arson wildfires in the Western United States reviews the meager literature on arsonists.¹ The literature is based on (a) case studies of individuals, (b) anecdotal records, and (c) clinical samples—people referred for mental health treatment for setting fires or who, in addition to other acts, set fires. The reports suggest that arsonists come from poor economic or disturbed backgrounds or both; often have only one parent at home; and have early contact with legal and mental health agencies.¹ These limited databases imply that deprivation during childhood leads to the use of fire as a powerful tool for self-expression while avoiding personal confrontation. Some anecdotal records suggest that an absent father is the key element in childhood disturbances.

This note offers a tentative look at 90 arsonists from California and New York who form a nonrandom sample interviewed for the California Department of Forestry between 1977 and 1979.

An arsonist typical of the sample is a 21-year-old single male Caucasian, 5 feet 9 inches tall, weighing 167 pounds (by coincidence, this is nearly identical to the average American male), and with 10 years of formal education. He set one or two fires with what could be described as expedient materials—

book matches and gasoline, or other available material. About 4 out of 10 in the sample set more than one fire. The fire scene was not far from his home and he walked to it. He probably felt angry and set the fire on the spur of the moment—an act of nonpersonal aggression. His fire may have caused damage, but probably did not cause fatalities. His childhood background did not appear too unusual or deprived, although he did not adjust well in school. He had at least one felony arrest and a history of detention. He was likely to have been in a mental hospital at least once. He set fires at a young age. Those who did set their first arson fire at a younger age were more likely to (a) have set more fires, (b) have been in mental hospitals, and (c) had more arson convictions than those who set their first arson fire at an older age.

METHODS

A questionnaire was developed to help guide personal interviews with 90 respondents, most of whom had been arrested for arson and imprisoned. Eleven of the 90 were in mental health facilities for arson; the rest in hospitals had arson in their histories. The survey described for these arsonists (a) their physical characteristics and backgrounds; (b) their personal fire histories; and (c) their thoughts on the deterrence of intentionally set fires.

Table 1—*Characteristics of sample population and general population of the United States*

Characteristic	Sample	United States
	<i>Percent</i>	
Caucasian	66	86
Black	21	12
Hispanic: New York	9	9
Hispanic: California	9	19
Males over 16 with less than 12 years of education	63	27
Arson arrests: ¹		
Male	100	89
Male and less than 18 years of age	49	52
Arrests, by race: ¹		
Caucasian	66	77
Black	21	21
Other	11	2

¹As of 1977.

Not all respondents answered every question. And, occasionally, responses were in answer categories or codes not included on the survey.

RESPONDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS AND BACKGROUNDS

All respondents were male—50 percent between 17 and 25 years old. They averaged 5 feet 9 inches tall and 167 pounds. Fifty-nine respondents (66 pct) were Caucasian, 19 (21 pct) were Black, and 8 (9 pct) were Mexican-American. These data were compared to demographic information about the general population (*table 1*).^{2,3}

Of the 90 in the sample, 43 (49 pct) reported tattoos and 10 (11 pct) had some sort of disfigurement. Sixty-six (75 pct) held heterosexual preferences, 14 were bisexual, and 7 expressed

Table 3—*Firesetting history of respondents in survey*

Activity	Number of fires set (n = 90) . . .						
	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	21-40	41+
	<i>Respondents</i>						
Fires set	35	14	6	12	10	7	5
Convictions for fires set	50	13	5	3	10	0	0
Fires set, but not apprehended	6	0	6	7	6	6	4
Times questioned for arson, but not arrested	12	8	5	3	0	0	0
Fires set at one place, at one time	71	8	8	1	0	0	0

homosexual preferences. Sixty-nine (77 pct) of the respondents were single and another 11 (12 pct) were divorced.

More than two-thirds of the respondents did *not* come from broken homes. Fifty-six (62 pct) reported a childhood with both biological parents at home; 10 (11 pct) had only their biological mother. Forty-two (47 pct) respondents had a close, loving relationship with their father; 16 (18 pct) expressed respect but no affection for their father. Fifteen (17 pct) reported the father-son relationship hateful. Fifty-two arsonists (60 pct) reported they came from middle-class neighborhoods; 31 (34 pct) said they came from lower-class neighborhoods.

Respondents were asked for their perceptions of the quality of their childhood settings. Family setting and social environment (e.g., playmates) were reported as friendly by most. School experiences were not so positive: most respondents reported their schooling as troubled and this is reflected in reports of schooling. The median education was 10 years. Most respondents did not report troubled family settings, but the majority had problems with law enforcement agen-

cies. Seventy-one (78 pct) had been arrested for a felony. The felony arrest reported may have been the one for which they were confined when interviewed, nonetheless, they had a prison record (*table 2*). Most of the detention seems to have been to juvenile hall and local jails, probably because of their youth.

RESPONDENTS' FIRE HISTORIES

The questionnaire ascertained arsonists' early fire experiences and introduction to arson, one-half of them set their first arson fire between the ages of 9 and 17 years old. Thirty-six (64 pct) recalled that their first experience with fire was between 3 and 9 years of age; 15 (17 pct) said it was between 9 and 12 years of age. Of all 90 respondents, 24 (27 pct) said they were responsible for the first fire, 34 (38 pct) said they were not. The respondents did not report if the first fire was caused accidentally or intentionally. Seventy-three (81 pct) claimed they were not taught arson by other arsonists.

Thirty-five arsonists in the survey (39 pct) had set one fire, another 14 (16 pct) had set two, and 40 (46 pct) had set more than two (*table 3*). The repeat firesetters were responsible for 93 percent of the 938 fires reported by the sample. Seventy-two (80 pct) of those in the sample had been arrested for fires (or, *the* fire) they set; over one-half (56 pct) of the respondents had only one arson-related arrest. Thirty-five (39 pct) had set fire(s) and not been arrested. An interesting point for investigators is that 28 arsonists (31 pct)

Table 2—*Times arsonists confined in institution, by facility*

Facility	Times in confinement (n = 90) . . .		
	1	2	3+
Juvenile Hall	13	12	27
Jail	29	10	46
Prison	35	8	6
Mental hospital	26	5	20
Foster home	12	4	11
Youth camp	27	6	7

reported having been questioned for arson, but not arrested.

Respondents were asked, in addition to how many fires they had set in total, how many they set in different age categories (*table 4*). Of those who did report firesetting for an age level, the most common response was setting one fire. Most of the fires reported were set before 18 years of age. The picture emerging for this sample of confined arsonists, therefore, is one of an arsonist caught and convicted for the first or second fire he set. Seventy-one (79 pct) reported they had set only one fire at one place at one time. Perhaps this is because so many arsonists in the sample set only one fire.

Motivations for and reactions to firesetting were varied. More than 90 percent reported they had reasons for setting fires. Forty-seven (52 pct) set fires for revenge; 11 (12 pct) set fires for the thrill of it. The remainder cited as reasons: covering a crime, profit, no reason at all, or simply "other." Respondents also reported their emotions when setting fires: one-third felt angry, six (7 pct) reported frustration, 3 (3 pct) sadness, 9 (10 pct) fear, 14 (16 pct) no emotional response, and 18 (20 pct) "other" feelings. None of the 90 reported sexual feelings or emotions when setting fires.

Seventy-two (80 pct) of the arsonists removed nothing from the scene before setting the fire. The ignition agent was book matches (64 or 71 pct). The second most popular agent was an unspecified device; seven (8 pct) used wooden matches, and six (7 pct) used cigarette lighters. All but three used some material to facilitate spread of the fire. Twenty-three (26 pct) used gasoline, 13 (14 pct) used other petroleum products, and 13 (14 pct) relied on paper. Nineteen (21 pct) used "other fuel" and another 19 used "anything available." About one-half (47 or 57 pct) left something behind at the scene of the fire—matches, devices, gas cans, or other.

Respondents were also asked about alcohol or drug use and fire-setting. Forty-three (48 pct) said they used alcohol before setting fires, 43 (48 pct) reported they did not. A comparison

Table 4—Number of fires set, by age group

Age	Fires					Arsonists reporting fires (n = 90)
	1	2	3-5	6-10	11+	
3 to 5	5	1	—	—	—	6
6 to 10	10	3	4	1	4	22
11 to 13	6	5	2	5	1	19
14 to 16	12	3	5	6	5	31
17 to 18	11	4	5	2	4	26
19 to 21	17	2	5	2	2	28
22 to 29	18	2	6	2	4	32
30 to 35	7	—	—	—	2	9
36 to 40	2	1	1	—	—	4
41 to 50	—	—	—	—	3	3
51 to 60	—	1	—	—	—	1
Over 60	—	—	—	—	—	0

of fire distributions for those who did and those who did not use alcohol before arson reveals no differences in firesetting behavior. In both situations, about one-half set one fire and six to eight set two fires. One-fourth of the respondents reported alcohol use after setting fires, three-fourths reported no such use. Thirty (33 pct) of the respondents reported drug use before setting fires. Five (5 pct) said they used drugs after setting fires. The majority of those who reported alcohol and drug use, either before or after firesetting, reported they always used the substance.

How long an arsonist remained at or returned to the scene after the fire was set varied. Only 25 (28 pct) remained at the scene, 62 (71 pct) did not. Of those who left the scene, 37 (41 pct) never returned, 20 (22 pct) left to view the fire from another vantage point, and 44 (49 pct) returned to the scene at different times. The arsonists who returned to the scene of the fire later were asked when they returned. Twelve (27 pct of the returnees) set fires to which they returned immediately, 12 (27 pct) returned within 20 minutes, 5 (11 pct) returned within one-half hour. Ten (23 pct) returned the next day. The remaining 10 each returned to the scene at different time intervals after the fire. Of those who returned to their fire scene, single and repeat firesetters were about equal in number.

Arsonists in this study, for the most part, acted alone. Only 13 (16 pct) reported having others along when set-

ting fires. Twelve (13 pct) arsonists responded to the question about leadership of the group: four (4 pct) were leaders, six (7 pct) were not and, in two instances, the respondent shared leadership in the arson.

One respondent reported one death from his arson, the remainder reported no fatalities.

Respondents in this sample did not, generally, travel far to set the fire and, typically, they traveled by foot. Eleven (12 pct) were at home when they set the fire and 34 (39 pct) traveled one to five blocks from home to the fire scenes. Twenty-one (24 pct) went 1/2 to 2 miles to set fires. For 50 (56 pct), the most common mode of transportation was walking. The second largest group 17 (19 pct) reported they were already at the site and needed no transportation. Twelve arsonists (13 pct) reported using automobiles; a small number of respondents used bicycles and motorcycles. No one in the sample reported use of trucks or vans.

Respondents committed arson against a variety of targets (*table 5*). Most fires were set in residences or other structures—sheds, garages, barns, and other buildings. Twenty-three (37 pct) respondents had set fires in wildlands, 14 (16 pct) of these set two or more.

The typical respondent had about 10 years of education. Those respondents with less education (below the median) did not set more fires than those with more education. The patterns of single as against repeat firesetters were the

Table 5—Number of times respondent committed arson, by type of targets

Targets	Fires (n = 90)					
	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	21+
Residences	25	2	8	2	—	1
Businesses	12	3	1	1	—	1
Other structures	20	10	4	3	1	3
Vehicles	8	3	—	1	2	2
Wildland	9	2	5	1	4	2
Other	7	4	5	4	2	3

same for the number of fires set and number of convictions regardless of educational level.

Respondents' ages at the time of interview ranged from 17 to 51 years. Ages reported for the first arson fire set ranged from 5 to 41 years; one-half of the respondents set their first arson fire before age 19. Data were further examined in terms of when respondents started setting arson fires. Two groups were identified: (1) those who set fires early in life, and (2) those who set fires later in life. The age at which a person is treated as an adult by the legal system is 18. Respondents were placed into age groups on the basis of whether they set their first arson fire before age 18 as legal "nonadults" (the younger group), or whether they started as legal adults age 18 and over (the older group). Dividing the sample into groups on the basis of age of first arson reveals surprising information about those who started younger.

Arsonists who started incendiarism younger were more likely to be repeat firesetters; those who started at older ages were more likely to be single firesetters (*table 6*). Respondents who started arson at younger ages tended to have multiple convictions for firesetting, but those who started older tended toward a single conviction. Younger fire starters were more likely to have spent time in mental health facilities than those who started older. For all those arsonists who reported hospitalization, two-thirds set their first arson fire as a teenager or younger, under eighteen years of age.

Perhaps arsonists starting younger were not categorically different from the older fire starters but simply had more years in arson activities (*table 6*). The only difference not attributable to

age is in numbers of fires set—earlier starters set two per year of arson activity and the later starters set one per year of arson activity.

We found no relationship between respondents' education and their age when they started their first arson fire. Those who started younger had no more, or no less, education than those who started older.

RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DETERRENTS

Respondents were asked about the likelihood of arson conviction for fires they set. One-third (33 pct) said they did not consider the chance of conviction before they set fires. Eighteen (21 pct) thought there was no chance of conviction; twenty-one (24 pct) thought there was a slight chance. Sixteen (18 pct) thought, before setting fires, that there was a strong chance they would be convicted for it. All arsonists were also asked if they would have set fires if they were sure they

would be convicted for doing so. Fifty-two (65 pct) said "no," and 26 (29 pct) said "yes."

Respondents were asked how much they agreed that four selected deterrents would discourage firesetting; 61 (67 pct) answered this battery of questions. Two-thirds of those who answered thought a greater risk of prison sentence would deter firesetting. Given that sentencing would be likely, the length of the sentence would not have much influence in preventing firesetting. More efficient investigation may discourage fires in that it increases the risk of a sentence. Two-thirds of the valid responses agreed that more medical or psychological facilities would discourage arson. On the other hand, 38 (76 pct) of the 50 arsonists in the sample who reported hospital treatment also reported being repeat firesetters. This report contradicts the idea of treatment as deterrence.

Deterrence for these respondents would be a certainty of receiving a sentence, not the severity of the sentence. The functioning of a deterrent, however, is a complex issue that, based on data presented above, is open to debate. Not only would potential arsonists have to learn that certainty of sentencing is high, they would also have to recall it when thinking of setting a fire. And, as data also show, firesetting for these arsonists may be an impulsive act with little prior thought (whether thoughts of future punishment or anything else).

Table 6—Characteristics and arson activity of younger (< 18 years old) and older fire starters

Characteristic	Younger starters	Older starters
	Average (range)	Average (range)
Arson activity (yrs)	12 (1-36)	4 (0-17)
Age at first arson (yrs)	13 (5-17)	24 (18-41)
Age at interview (yrs)	25 (17-51)	28 (19-46)
Arson fires set (no.)	18 (1-99)	4 (1-30)
Arson fires/yr/arson activity (no.)	2 (0.06-16)	1 (0.05-6)
Arson convictions (no.)	2 (0-11)	1 (0-8)
Arson convictions/yr/arson activity (no.)	0.4 (0-11)	0.5 (0-2)
Times in mental health facility (no.)	2 (0-9)	2 (0-9)
Times in mental health facility/yr/arson (no.)	0.2 (0-0.8)	0.6 (0-6)

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the arsonists in the sample have one characteristic in common: they are among the very few arsonists to get caught—a fact that may make them different from arsonists in general. Many differences are evident between data reported from this sample and conceptions of arsonists in the literature or currently held by fire

agencies. Whether these differences are real or happenstance is unknown because the sample was nonrandom. The data should not be taken as representative of arsonists in general, but as a description of the arsonists interviewed for this study.

NOTES

¹Utz, Pamela J.; Forst, Martin L. *Problem*

analysis: preventing incendiary forest fires in the west. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Law and Society, University of California; 1978. 131 p.

²U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *1980 census of population*, Section A, Table 262; Washington, DC; 1983.

³U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 1982-1983; Tables 305 and 306*. 103d edition. Washington, DC; 1983.

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