***UNIT 1:***

***LEADING A YOUTH FIRESETTING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM***

*terminal objective*

*1.1 The students will be able to summarize the overall job performance requirements (JPRs) of a Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention (YFPI) program manager.*

*enabling objectives*

*The students will be able to:*

*1.1 Discuss desirable leadership traits of a YFPI program manager.*

*1.2 Describe current trends in youth firesetting.*

*1.3 Discuss the typologies of firesetting and common factors that influence firesetting behaviors.*

*1.4 Characterize the youth firesetting problem in their home community and strategies that have proven successful in addressing the problem.*

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I. LEADING A YOUTH FIRESETTING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAM

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A. A job performance requirement (JPR) of a program manager is the ability to develop and lead a local program.

B. Leading a Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention (YFPI) program can be a challenging yet important and rewarding position.

C. The position carries tremendous responsibility because the manager often has authority (or co-responsibility with the youth firesetting interagency task force) to make final disposition of how youth firesetting cases are processed.

D. The job is both proactive and reactive in nature. While the ultimate goal is to prevent youth firesetting incidents, the program manager must ensure that policies and procedures are in place to handle all profiles of firesetting situations. This requires vision, leadership and mastery of a diverse set of skills.

E. The ultimate job of the YFPI program leader is to ensure that youth firesetting risks in the community are addressed both efficiently and effectively.

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F. The manager needs to have a professional skill set so that he or she is competent in the following roles:

1. Program leader or administrator.

2. Excellent organizer and communicator.

3. Mentor.

4. Politician.

5. Problem-solver.

6. Visionary.

G. As learned in the Level 1 course, the most effective risk-reduction strategies are those that employ a broad-based, integrated approach utilizing a combination of prevention interventions.

H. The goal of utilizing multiple interventions in parallel is twofold:

1. Prevent incidents from occurring.

2. When prevention fails, reduce (mitigate) the impact of the incident.

I. It is a JPR for the program manager to possess the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) to help design the interventions that will be utilized as part of the YFPI program.

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J. Prevention interventions include:

1. Education.

a. Public education builds the foundation for use of integrated prevention strategies.

b. However, if utilized as a stand-alone intervention, education can be a weak strategy.

c. Informing constituents of the youth firesetting issues that are impacting, or have potential to threaten, the local community.

d. Teaching the community how the risk develops and what they can do to help prevent it and/or mitigate its impact.

e. Creating a sense of urgency through the use of a fact-based rationale that explains why youth firesetting is serious and how a combination of preventive interventions can be utilized for prevention/mitigation.

f. Demonstrating the advantages of utilizing a multifaceted approach to prevention and mitigation that ultimately results in a safer community.

2. Engineering.

a. Engineering can help create passive protection that requires no action on the part of people.

b. Sprinkler systems, fire-resistive building construction and child-resistive lighters are examples of passive equipment.

c. Public policy can mandate the use of engineering and technology so that prescribed preventive standards are met.

d. It can also require ongoing maintenance/servicing of equipment to ensure its effectiveness.

e. Investigating how a living environment could be modified so prevention and/or mitigation are accomplished is also an example of engineering.

f. Examples include:

- Presence of working smoke-detection systems.

- Integrated systems that automatically notify the emergency services when incidents occur.

- Automatic suppression systems.

- Reduction of combustible materials in high-risk situations.

g. Explore how technology can be utilized to enhance safety.

- Use of child-resistive lighters by parents.

3. Enforcement.

a. Enactment of public policy and its application/enforcement can be a very powerful prevention component because it can be mandated or prohibited.

b. Those who apply/enforce policy should be trained that they are public educators first, enforcers second.

c. Voluntary compliance of a policy or code should be the ultimate aim of an enforcement agency.

d. Voluntary compliance is the most effective proof that the community has developed buy-in to a policy because it demonstrates that people understand and approve its existence.

e. There is a definite place for enforcement when addressing blatant noncompliance with conditions set by an YFPI program or when acts of firesetting occur.

f. The mindset toward public policy of both the program manager and task force can set the tone for community trust and future successes in prevention/mitigation of youth firesetting.

g. Demonstrate professional enforcement practices that reflect positively on the YFPI program.

4. Economic incentives.

This entails working to incorporate incentives (both positive and negative) that support youth firesetting risk reduction.

a. Positive incentives reward constituents for proactive behavior or provide free/low-cost services to support life safety.

b. Negative incentives penalize people for infractions of adopted public policies and may include civil and criminal sanctions.

5. Emergency response.

a. Support the existence of an adequately staffed, equipped and trained group of emergency responders that can rapidly respond to incidents of firesetting.

b. This response team not only includes firefighters who respond to incidents, but also staff members such as investigators and allied agencies that support program referral/intake services.

K. It is the responsibility of the program manager to work with his or her organization and community to identify local youth firesetting priorities, and address them in a **strategic** manner.

II. DEVELOPING A LEADERSHIP MINDSET

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A. The program manager may come from one of several professions including, but not limited to:

1. Fire service.

2. Law enforcement or youth justice agencies.

3. Mental health or social services.

4. School system.

5. Other allied agencies.

B. Whatever the profession of the program manager, most who assume command of the YFPI program quickly realize that developing the right mindset is essential.

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C. The mindset/attitude of an effective and efficient program manager should include:

1. Effective and efficient risk reduction must follow a strategic process.

a. The leader of the prevention unit must visualize the “big picture” of community risk reduction.

b. The process begins with a comprehensive community risk assessment to identify and prioritize the local youth firesetting problem.

c. It continues as the interagency task force defines the highest priorities and root causes of the local problem. A well-defined problem is a problem half-solved.

d. Interagency task force members should represent a diverse group of agencies (stakeholders) who bring various experiences and perspectives to the process.

e. Once the magnitude of the local youth firesetting problem has been identified, risk sequencing is utilized to study how the various profiles of firesetting develop and occur. It is at this point that a discussion of what combination of prevention interventions to employ occurs.

f. As stated repeatedly, the most effective and efficient strategy entails the use of combined prevention interventions that have been suggested and are supported by the interagency task force.

2. The program manager must create an environment that portrays participating in the process of YFPI as an elite responsibility, and the program must be selective about who it chooses as members.

3. Effective leaders understand the strengths and challenges of their team members.

4. This attribute becomes very important when the program manager is supervising a group of Level 1 intervention specialists.

Proficient leaders invest time to learn the interests and attributes of team members. They will help team members grow by facilitating continuing education and skill-building opportunities.

5. Budget preparation and management skills are essential for building, sustaining and advancing a YFPI program.

a. Every program must have a budget.

b. Program managers, in cooperation with the interagency task force, are responsible for developing and managing a budget that supports the goals and objectives of the YFPI program.

c. Youth firesetting intervention specialists must have the basic tools that are needed to perform their duties safely, effectively and efficiently.

d. The organization and community’s budget cycle and spending procedures must be understood.

e. More information on budgeting will be provided in Unit 2.

6. Understand that YFPI programs can be “resource-challenged.”

a. The recent economic recession (crisis) proved that even important programs like YFPI efforts are not immune from staffing cuts, reductions in services provided, and even elimination.

b. Citizens demand basic services from their local government such as working public utilities, trash collection and police protection.

c. In an era of economic challenges, when pressed to prioritize funding of local government services, many decision-makers have had to make tough choices on spending priorities.

d. Not only did firefighters get laid off in some communities, but many departments also lost a portion (or in some cases all) of their prevention units.

e. Leaders of YFPI programs must embrace the mindset that we must do a better job of justifying the essential function of our services.

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- Program leaders, cooperatively with their interagency task force, must commit to developing a strategic evaluation plan so that every function of the program is measured for both impact and efficiency.

- The worth of YFPI must be proven, not just stated. This is best accomplished through a comprehensive program evaluation that begins the minute an idea for a prevention program is conceived and continues throughout its life cycle.

- It is important for key stakeholders in the community to be engaged in the YFPI program evaluation process. They are the clients who will influence the political decision of worth.

- The leader must understand the importance of investigating and pursuing creative methods of revenue generation to support his or her unit.

- The leader must also realize that service agencies like fire and police departments are often looked upon as an expense and not as a revenue-generating source.

- Again, the mindset: The YFPI program must prove that they are saving the community money in property tax revenues through a reduction of incidents or events that occur with less severity because of proactive prevention/mitigation strategies.

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7. Participation in the local political process is not only a reality, it is essential.

a. If an interagency task force proposes public policy or applies specific sanctions, its leader must understand and be adept at participating in the local political process.

b. This requires understanding the local process of proposing policy and issue resolution.

c. It also requires a keen analysis of the local political environment and how to participate in an effective manner.

d. Political environments are dynamic and constantly changing/ evolving. The leader must be able to forecast, recognize and adapt to a changing environment.

8. The program manager must have a positive working relationship with the chief administrators of partner agencies and political leaders, as well as administrators from other government agencies and community groups.

The ability to communicate, collaborate, negotiate and compromise are traits that have been mastered by those who lead effective YFPI programs.

9. Commitment, integrity and ethical behavior are essential.

a. A comprehensive YFPI program task force is often comprised of agencies/people who are responsible for enforcing fire, criminal and child-protective laws.

b. This responsibility brings with it the reality of liability in case ethics violations or acts of gross negligence take place. Failure to accept this responsibility and act accordingly may result in program derailment.

10. Professional development provides opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills so that the program leader is adequately prepared to address his or her JPRs.

III. TRENDS IN FIRESETTING AND THE KINDS OF FIRES SET BY YOUTHS

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A. Youth firesetting facts.

1. According to NFPA, the majority of youth firesetting incidents (77 percent) occur outdoors.

2. However, 92 percent of deaths associated with youth firesetting occur in home structure fires (Hall, 2010).

a. Most child-related home fires are started with lighters or matches. (Hall, 2010).

b. Almost half (42 percent) of child-related home structure fires begin in the bedroom. The most commonly lit items in these fires are mattresses, bedding and clothing (Flynn, 2009).

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3. One very noteworthy fact is that, even though we have been discussing young children as firesetters, statistically speaking, youth between the ages of 11 and 14 are at the greatest risk for setting fires.

4. Boys are at the greatest risk for setting fires. Annually, 80 to 85 percent of the identified firesetters are male (Boberg, 2006).

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5. Times, days and months of youth-set fires:

a. There is no peak day for child-related home structure fires.

b. Both home structure and outside fires involving youth peak in the after-school hours before dinner time (Flynn, 2009).

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c. Youth fire incidents peak during the month of July.

d. One out of every four youth-related incidents that occurred outside was in the month of July.

e. More than two out of every three (67 percent) outside and other type of youth-related incidents in July involved fireworks (Flynn, 2009).

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6. Fireworks and fires.

a. The risk of fireworks injury was the highest for teens ages 15 to 19 and children 5 to 9, both with at least 2 1/2 times the risk of the general population (Hall, 2010).

b. Two out of five (40 percent) people injured by fireworks were under the age of 15 (Hall, 2010).

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7. The good news about child-set fires:

a. Since 1980, all child-related structure fires have decreased 79 percent, and home structure fires have decreased 81 percent (Flynn, 2009).

b. During the same period, civilian deaths caused by child-related fires have declined by 84 percent. Injuries have decreased by 61 percent (Hall, 2010).

c. Property loss (adjusted to inflation) has declined by 38 percent (Hall, 2010).

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d. Outside and other fires have decreased 95 percent since 1980 (Flynn, 2009).

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8. In 1994, the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) set a mandatory safety standard requiring the manufacturing and importation of cigarette lighters to be child-resistant.

9. In a 2002 evaluation of the effectiveness of the 1994 CPSC lighter safety standard, CPSC found a 58 percent reduction in fires caused by children younger than five compared to children over the age of five (Smith and Greene, 2002).

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10. Youth firesetting and arson.

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a. The crime of arson has the highest rate of juvenile involvement compared to all other crimes.

b. According to the FBI, nearly half of all arson arrests in the U.S. are of juveniles under the age of 18. Nearly one-third of those arrested were under the age of 15, and 5 percent were under the age of 10 (FBI, 2006).

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c. In 2008, there were an estimated 6,600 juveniles arrested for arson in the U.S. Of those arrested, 56 percent were under age 15, and 12 percent were female (OJJDP, 2009).

d. Following a 19 percent decline between 2006 and 2008, the juvenile arrest rate for arson in 2008 reached its lowest point since 1980 (OJJDP, 2009).

11. School fires.

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a. The most deadly school fire in American history occurred on Dec. 1, 1958, at Our Lady of the Angels parochial school on Chicago’s West Side. Three nuns and 92 students were killed.

b. The fire was started by an angry student.

12. Causes of school fires:

a. Structure fires in preschools and day care centers are predominantly due to cooking (64 percent), followed by heating (7 percent) and electrical distribution (6 percent) (FEMA, 2007).

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b. The causes for fires in kindergarten or elementary schools mostly involve cooking (27 percent), incendiary or suspicious activity (25 percent), and heating (12 percent) (FEMA, 2007).

c. The primary cause of fires in middle, junior or senior high schools is due to incendiary or suspicious activity (47 percent), followed by cooking (15 percent) and heating (7 percent) (FEMA, 2007).

13. Time, day and month of school fires.

a. According to the National Fire Data Center (NFDC), overall, the average peak month for school fires was July. The lowest incidence of school fires occurred between December and February (FEMA, 2007).

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b. The NFDC states that the sharp increase in July school fires is driven by the number of elementary school fires. This suggests that elementary schools may be more attractive targets for incendiary or suspicious fires during the summer when fewer staff members monitor the school campuses (FEMA, 2007).

c. Middle, junior and senior high schools had more fire incidents in the fall and spring, which mark the beginning and end of the school year (FEMA, 2007).

14. Where school fires start:

a. The three leading areas where school fires begin are the bathroom, kitchen and small assembly areas (FEMA, 2007).

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b. Twenty-five percent of all school structure fires begin in bathroom trash cans, and they are of incendiary or suspicious nature (FEMA, 2007).

c. Seventy-eight percent of all school bathroom fires occur in middle, junior and senior high schools (FEMA, 2007).

15. It is very important that all YFPI program staff have a good working relationship with the schools and school district(s) in their community.

There has to be an element of trust formed between the youth firesetting intervention program and the school personnel, or the school personnel will be reluctant to contact the youth firesetting intervention program staff, the fire department, and law enforcement if there is a school fire situation.

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16. Many schools and school districts fear that if they report school fires, it will damage their reputation and cause the fear in their community that their school is a “bad” school, thus lowering the school’s or district’s rating. This might result in a loss of funding opportunities.

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B. Youth use of explosive and pressure-creating devices.

1. Youth have experimented with constructing and using incendiary/ explosive/pressure-creating devices for decades.

2. Experimentation and purposeful acts of destruction have expanded dramatically as a result of easy access to information.

3. Youth have easy access to instructions on how to make/use devices.

4. Many websites provide visual examples of youth engaged in dangerous behaviors involving incendiary/explosive devices.

IV. TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING

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A. From 2005 to the present, current youth firesetting researchers have expanded the typology categories to five because not all risk-taking firesetters fit into the category of troubled firesetting.

B. These additions are due to the advent of social media, the Internet and cellular telephones.

C. Today’s youth firesetting typology categories include:

1. Curiosity/Experimentation.

2. Crisis/Troubled/Cry-for-help.

3. Thrill-seeking/Risk-taking.

4. Delinquent/Criminal/Strategic.

5. Pathological/Severely disturbed/Cognitively impaired/Thought-disordered.

D. The reason for the expansion of typology categories from three to five is because not all thrill-seeking firesetters fit into the delinquent category.

1. It is very common for adolescents to engage in risk-taking behavior that includes fire; however, they would not all be considered delinquent.

2. However, some firesetters set fires with willful intent to cause damage, conceal a crime or destroy evidence.

3. In the past, both of the above profiles of firesetters would have been categorized as troubled. The separation of willful intent from thrill-seeking/risk-taking helps better clarify the motives behind the firesetting behaviors.

E. Curiosity/Experimentation.

1. Most children experience fire interest between the ages of 3 to 5.

2. It has been estimated that curiosity-motivated firesetting represents greater than 60 percent of all fires set by children (NFPA and USFA).

3. The curiosity-motivated firesetter is a child who is exploring his or her interest in fire through experimentation.

4. Curious and experimental firesetting refers primarily to young children, ages 2 through 10. The median (average) age of a curiosity-motivated firesetter is 5 years old (IFSTA, 2010).

F. Crisis/Troubled/Cry-for-help.

1. Intentional firesetting may be influenced by cognitive, psychological or social problems. It can also be exacerbated by environmental factors such as access to ignition materials, lack of adult supervision, and family dysfunction.

2. This type of firesetting is extremely dangerous because it often consists of a series of fire starts, both planned and/or spontaneous, that take place over several weeks, months or even years. The severity of fires may vary.

3. In some cases, there is intent to destroy or harm specific property and/or people. Once a fire is started, the firesetter may not make an attempt to extinguish his or her fire or seek help. The fire acts as a symbol of a problem and signals a cry for help in response to a stressful life experience or abuse.

G. Thrill-seeking/Risk-taking.

1. In contrast to curiosity, some adolescent firesetters try to duplicate forms of dangerous behaviors seen in various mediums such as in person, through video gaming or on the Internet.

2. Experimentation with fire, explosives and other pressure-creating devices (bottle bombs) can serve as the “ultimate” risk for adolescents engaging in thrill-seeking/risk-taking behaviors.

H. Delinquent/Criminal/Strategic.

1. What distinguishes the delinquent, criminal and strategic firesetters from thrill-seeking/risk-taking youth is the planned willful intent to cause destruction.

2. Purposeful destructive firesetting by adolescents often targets fields, mailboxes, dumpsters and abandoned structures.

3. Delinquent firesetters often set fires, discharge fireworks or falsely activate fire alarms because of peer pressure, boredom or to show off. In many major cities, delinquent juvenile firesetting is often used as a rite of initiation for joining a gang.

4. Criminal and strategic firesetters may use fire to conceal a crime that has been committed.

I. Pathological/Severely disturbed/Cognitively impaired/Thought-disordered.

1. Left unaddressed, youth firesetting behaviors can transcend into a pathology of continuous fire starting.

2. Pathological firesetting is very disconcerting because the perpetrator uses fire as a means for receiving gratification without regard to others.

3. A pathological firesetter may start hundreds of fires for a plethora of reasons. The term “pyromania” refers to a pathology whereby a person sets many planned fires for pleasure or to release stress.

4. Pathological firesetters may have a high IQ. Their fires are often sophisticated, cleverly set, and cause significant damage.

5. The fires will have a distinct pattern and may serve as a type of ritual for the firesetter.

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J. Not all firesetters have cognitive, behavioral or learning disorders.

1. Just because a youth firesetter has been diagnosed with a cognitive, behavioral or learning disorder does not necessarily mean that he or she is predisposed to set a fire or that the fire he or she set was caused by the disorder.

2. It is also important to remember that youth firesetting behavior can be influenced by the youth’s social, cultural and environmental circumstances.

K. Four common factors that influence firesetting behavior.

While social, cultural and environmental circumstances may influence firesetting behaviors, empirical evidence identifies four common factors that directly contribute to youth firesetting behavior. These factors impact all typologies of firesetters and include:

1. Easy access to ignition materials.

2. Lack of adequate supervision.

3. A failure to practice fire safety.

4. Easy access to information on the Internet.

V. UNDERSTANDING YOUR LOCAL YOUTH FIRESETTING PROBLEM

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A. Understanding the youth firesetting problem in your community is the first step in developing your firesetting intervention program.

B. Collecting the available information on the youth firesetting problem in your community will demonstrate to the community the need for a firesetting intervention program and will answer the following questions:

1. What are the demographics of your community?

2. Who is setting fires in your community?

3. What kinds of fires are being set by youth?

4. What costs are associated with these fires (e.g., injuries, lives lost, property damage, loss of environmental resources, etc.)?

C. The pre-course assignment for YFPI required you to conduct research on the topics listed above.

D. Finding data on the occurrence and effects of youth firesetting at the local level may have been a challenging process.

E. As a program manager, you must have mastery understanding of the extent of your local youth firesetting problem.

F. You must create a factual rationale for why a YFPI is needed or why an existing program should be expanded.

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ACTIVITY 1.1

Your Local Youth Firesetting Problem and Solutions

Purpose

To compare your local youth firesetting problem and solutions with peers.

Directions

1. Please locate and review the information collected as part of your pre-course assignment. There are five minutes allotted for this task.

2. Members of your table group should compare and contrast the following. There are 15 minutes allotted for these tasks.

a. Scope of the youth firesetting problem:

- Incidents and their locations.

- Types of youth firesetting.

- Types of other incidents: explosives, fireworks, pressure-created devices.

- Common factors contributing to youth firesetting problem.

- Age distribution of firesetters.

- Gender distribution of firesetters.

- Injuries, deaths and property loss.

- Trends noticed in any of the above topics.

- Annual average number of youth arrests for fire or explosive-related incidents.

- State’s Age of Accountability Law.

b. Composition of the community:

- Demographics of community/neighborhoods (stable versus high-risk locations).

- Housing profiles (e.g., more owners than renters).

- Economic characteristics of the community.

- Size of the school system.

- Community growth or shrinkage.

c. Risk-reduction programs:

- What school- and community-based risk-reduction programs are offered by your organization?

- Do any of these programs contain content aimed at **preventing** the occurrence of youth firesetting? Why or why not? How much time and money is invested into preventing acts of youth firesetting?

d. Existing youth firesetting program:

- If your organization has a YFPI program, please briefly describe it. Please also identify what’s working well and what may need improvement.

3. As culmination to this activity, the class at large will be asked to predict future trends in youth firesetting behaviors that are likely to be experienced by interventionists. You will be expected to discuss how these trends impact the way intervention programs are developed and managed. There are five minutes allotted for this task.

VI. SUMMARY

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APPENDIX

**READINGS**

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**A Brief History of Research on Juvenile Firesetting**

**The Elements of Arson**

When a fire occurs it is the responsibility of the fire investigator to determine the cause of the fire. The fire investigator looks for three elements to determine if the fire can be considered the crime of arson. DeHaan (2002) identified these as follows:

* There has been a burning of property. This must be shown to the court to be actual destruction, at least in part, not just scorching or sooting (although some states include any physical or visible impairment of any surface).
* The burning is incendiary in origin. Proof of the existence of an effective incendiary device, no matter how simple it may be, is adequate. Proof must be accomplished by showing specifically how all-possible natural or accidental causes have been considered and ruled out.
* The burning is shown to be started with malice, which is with intent of destroying property (p. 508).

**The Early Years of Arson Motives**

According to Wooden and Berkey (1984), “Arson itself is as old as civilization, but it was not until the nineteenth century that there appeared to be much concern about the motivations for it or about the psychological stability of arsonists” (p. 12). As already reported, in the 1800s and early 1900s, considerable emphasis was placed on arsonists suffering from pyromania.

It was not until the mid-1960s that research on the motives of arsonists moved away from theories of a certain type of deviance. In 1966, McKerraccher and Dacre studied 30 adult male arsonists in a forensic psychiatric setting. They found that when compared with 147 adult non-arson offenders, the motives for the arsons were related to feelings of aggression rather than deviance. In support of McKerraccher and Dacre’s findings, Wolford (1972) reported that arsonists were unable to express their anger to others. Vreeland and Waller (1979) supported Wolford’s findings when their research found that arsonists could not confront the object(s) of their anger / aggression, and instead the arsonists displaced that anger / aggression against property by starting fires.

In addition to the literature that focuses on pyromania, more current discussions of arson revolve around criminality. The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) has identified six major categories of arson motives:

* Profit
* Vandalism
* Excitement
* Revenge
* Crime concealment
* Extremism (DeHaan, 2002, p. 509)

According to DeHaan (2002), of these six categories, the vandalism category is most closely associated with juvenile and adolescent firesetting. The fires are “set when the opportunity arises, often after school or work or on weekends. Boredom and frustration among youths, sometimes lead to peer-group challenge to create some excitement” (p. 511).

O’Connor (1987) identified nine categories for the various motives for arson: (a) arson for profit, which would include insurance fraud and welfare fraud; (b) business-related fraud, which includes eliminating the competition and organized crime; (c) demolition and rehabilitation scams and building strippers; (d) revenge and prejudice fires; (e) vanity or hero fires; (f) crime concealment fires; (g) mass civil disturbances; (h) terrorism; and (i) juvenile firesetters and vandalism. Yet in focusing solely on juveniles, O’Connor stated that “a motive for juvenile firesetters is not always apparent” (p. 20), like it is with an adult. In support of O’Connor, Boudreau et al. (1977) stated,

Vandalism is a common cause ascribed to fires set by juveniles who seem to burn property merely to relieve boredom or as a general protest against authority. Many school fires as well as fires in abandoned autos, vacant buildings and trash receptacles are believed to be caused by this type of arsonist (p. 19).

In other words, according to Boudreau et al. (1977), O’Connor (1987) and DeHaan (2002), unlike arson in general, the motive is not always apparent as to juvenile firesetting, and it could be just a symptom of boredom.

Juvenile Firesetting

In reviewing the literature that looks specifically at juvenile firesetting, four theoretical frameworks are evident: (a) Psychoanalytic Theory, (b) Social Learning Theory, (c) Dynamic-Behavioral Theory, and (d) Cycles of Firesetting Oregon Model. Each theory outlines the etiology for juvenile firesetting behavior based on the theoretical perspective of the researchers and three of the four are informed by a mental health perspective and have provided the foundation for the explanations of the motivations of firesetters to date.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalytic Theory is a theory of human development that interprets human development in terms of motives and drives. Those that prescribe to Psychoanalytic Theory believe that human development is “primarily unconscious and heavily colored by emotion. Behavior is merely a surface characteristic, and it is important to analyze the symbolic meanings of behavior, and that early experiences are important to human development” (Berger, 2005, p. 35). Psychoanalytic Theory prescribes that firesetting is a child’s desire to have power over something that he or she is able to extinguish him or herself.

Social Learning Theory

Bandura and Walters (1963) first introduced the Social Learning Theory as an extension of Miller and Dollard’s (1941) research on the behavioral interpretation of modeling. Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory looked at the importance of learning through observation and modeling of behaviors, reactions and attitudes of others. Bandura (1977) stated,

Learning would be exceeding laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action (p. 22).

Bandura (1973) believed that anger and aggression, just like other types of behaviors, were learned through observational learning. An individual’s observational learning comes from his or her family, cultural background, peer group, community and mass media. According to Gaynor and Hatcher (1987), aggressive children come from families where one or more members also demonstrate aggressive behaviors. Through modeling, children learn to exhibit aggressive behaviors. As a result, poor social skills begin to develop within the family and continue to occur outside the family, for example, with peers and in school. Hence the family, as well as the youngster’s other primary environments, reinforces the development of the socially deviant behavior of firesetting (pp. 46‑47).

The link between Social Learning Theory and juvenile firesetting would come from a child seeing a family member or peer set a fire out of anger or aggression.

Current firesetter researchers Kolko and Kazdin (1986) drew on Social Learning Theory to develop a risk-factor model for juvenile firesetters. This model includes three domains: (a) learning experiences and cues, (b) personal repertoire and (c) parent and family influences and stressors.

Learning experiences and cues would include the child’s early modeling and vicarious experiences, early interest and direct experiences, and the availability of adult models and incendiary materials. The personal repertoire would include cognitive components such as limited fire and fire safety awareness, behavioral components such as interpersonal ineffectiveness / skill deficits and antisocial behavior excesses, and motivational components. The parent and family influences and stressors would include limited supervision and monitoring, parental distance and noninvolvement, parental pathology and limitations, and stressful external events.

Dynamic-Behavioral Theory

Dr. Ken Fineman (1980) introduced the Dynamic-Behavioral Theory of firesetting in 1980 as a way to show that certain factors predispose a child to firesetting. These factors include (a) personality characteristics, (b) family and social situations and (c) environmental conditions (see Table 1 for a description of these factors).

**Table 1**

**DYNAMIC-BEHAVIORAL THEORY OF FIRESETTING (FINEMAN, 1980)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Category** | **Description** |
| Personality characteristics | Child’s exhibited behaviors, school adjustment, physical problems and organic dysfunctions. |
| Family and social situations | Information about the family system, how the child gets along with family members, how discipline is meted out, and if there is an ongoing crisis within the family. |
| Environmental conditions | The child receives encouragement to play with fire, models firesetting behavior identified in others, and deals with emotional distress, peer pressure and stress. |

Fineman (1995) introduced his Juvenile Firesetter Child and Family Risk Survey as a way to determine the future risk of firesetting of a child already determined to be a firesetter.

Cycles of Firesetting

Based upon years of experience working with juvenile firesetters, the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s Office and the Oregon Treatment Strategies Task Force partnered to develop the Cycles Model of Firesetting. According to Stadolnik (2000), “The Cycles Model is visually represented by four concentric circles that represent the four dimensions of a juvenile’s internal and external world that are considered to be related to their likelihood of firesetting” (p. 19). The cycle includes four circles: (a) the emotional / cognitive cycle, (b) the behavior cycle, (c) the family/household cycle, and (d) the community/social cycle. The four circles are described in Table 2.

**Table 2**

**CYCLES MODEL OF FIRESETTING (STADOLNIK, 2000)**

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| **Cycle** | **Description** |
| Emotional/cognitive | Juvenile’s thoughts and feelings after his or her firesetting event. |
| Behavior | Behaviors of the juvenile firesetter that coincide with his or her thoughts and feelings. |
| Family household | How the family responds to the firesetting event and the emotional environment of the juvenile’s household. |
| Community/social | Responses by the community to the firesetting and what level of support or restriction the firesetter and family receive. |

A vast number of empirical studies have been informed by these four theoretical frameworks of youth firesetting. The following section discusses this research timeline, beginning with the research of Dr. Helen Yarnell in the 1930s, through the current firesetter research of today. The chronology illustrates a move from studying institutionalized juvenile firesetters to the development of a series of typologies for non-institutionalized juvenile firesetters.

1930–1960

During 1937 and 1938, Dr. Helen Yarnell, working in the Psychiatric Division of Bellevue Hospital, undertook one of the very first studies on the phenomenon of juvenile firesetting. The reason for the study stemmed from her discovery that children who were referred to the Psychiatric Division of Bellevue Hospital for observation and firesetting tendencies showed a variation in their clinical firesetting background. Yarnell’s study team observed 60 children between the ages of 6 and 15. 60 percent were between the ages of 6 and 8 and 35 percent were between the ages of 11 and 15. Only two were girls, ages 6 and 7. The research team reviewed the children’s clinical history and completed interviews with each child. According to Yarnell (1940), the adolescent group’s findings were much different than that of the younger group; however, Yarnell’s study with the adolescent group was incomplete at the time of the printing of her monograph.

In the first column of Table 3 is a list of the findings on the children ages 6 through 8, with the exception of five children who were deemed to be mentally defective. In the second column of Table 3 is a list of the findings on the adolescents, ages 11 through 15. Yarnell found that children aged 6-8 started fires because of a deprivation of love and security at home, whereas older children viewed fire as exciting and entertaining.

**Table 3**

**Findings of Dr. Helen Yarnell’s 1937-1938 Study (Yarnell, 1940, pp. 272-286)**

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| **Ages 6 through 8** | **Ages 11 through 15** |
| 1. All of the children are of average to dull normal intelligence, but many had some special educational disability such as reading or arithmetic. This made their school adjustment difficult. | 1. This group showed little anxiety or regret for their firesetting. |
| 2. In every case, the child had been deprived of love and security in his / her home life. | 2. Anxiety dreams were infrequent. |
| 3. They set fires only when under stress in their home situation. | 3. The fires were planned, set away from home, and many caused losses involving thousands of dollars. |
| 4. The children set fires, with associated fantasies to burn some member of the family who had either withheld love from the child or become too serious a rival for the love of a parent. | 4. The adolescents waited to see the fires and enjoyed the noise and excitement from the fire engines. |
| 5. The fires are set in and around the home, cause little damage, and are usually put out by the child himself; significance is chiefly symbolic. | 5. The boys tended to go in pairs, with the exclusion of all other friends. The pairs included an aggressive and passive member, suggesting homosexual association; however, the researchers never proved this. |
| 6. The children show other types of asocial behavior such as running away from home, truancy, stealing and general hyperkinesis and aggression. |  |
| 7. All children show acute anxiety and suffer from terrifying dreams and fantasies, including vivid attacks by the devil, ghosts and skeletons. |  |
| 8. All children have some sexual conflicts and many tell of active masturbation, sodomy or fellatio; type of activity does not seem significant. |  |
| 9. Enuresis was noted in only nine of the cases and seemed a part of the general picture rather than specifically associated with the fire motif. |  |
| 10. A special group of children were orphans who had been placed in boarding homes but failed to make emotional adjustments. |  |

In a second study begun shortly after Yarnell’s study of 1937-1938, Drs. Nolan Lewis and Helen Yarnell (1951) looked at a group of 238 child firesetters between the ages of 5 and 15. In this study, the case records were obtained from fire reports, insurance investigators, juvenile research centers and juvenile courts. The 1951 study included the 30 cases from Yarnell’s previous 1937-1938 research study. In this study, Lewis and Yarnell reported a wide range of motivations for firesetting. These motivations included:

* With the exception of children who set fires against the school, the children’s intelligence ranged from low average to superior.
* Most of the fires occurred when the child was found to feel guilty over some type of sexual preoccupation.
* A number of the fires were symbolic and directed specifically toward one member of the family.
* Thirty-two percent of the firesetters set the fire because they liked fire and excitement.
* Twenty-two percent of the firesetters set the fire as revenge against a parent or foster home.
* Seventeen percent of the firesetters set the fire because they liked to see the fire engines.
* Fifteen percent of the firesetters set the fire out of revenge against their employer.
* Eight percent of the firesetters set the fire to be a hero.
* Six percent of the firesetters set the fire to cover or be associated with stealing.

Both the Yarnell (1940) and the Lewis and Yarnell (1951) studies were the first studies that looked specifically at the child and adolescent firesetter. These studies were the groundwork for future research on child and adolescent firesetting. Unfortunately, it was not until the 1970s, when research on juvenile firesetting resumed, that fire departments and mental health professionals began to notice the increasing numbers of child and adolescent firesetting incidents.

1960–1980

There was little research, aside from that of Lewis and Yarnell, throughout the 1940s and 1950s. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the fire service and mental health took notice of the large number of reported youth who were setting fires that were appearing in the fire service statistics of that time.

Macht and Mack (1968) began the resurgence in firesetting research in 1968. They studied four adolescent firesetters ages 16 to 18. In this study, they found that all four boys came from stressful home situations. The boys only set fires when they were away from their fathers, and each one of the boy’s fathers had some type of significant job involvement with fire. Macht and Mack concluded from their study that:

Fire had come to have a special and pleasurable meaning in the lives of these patients. . . . In an important sense, the firesetting represents a call from the overburdened adolescent to the absent father in order to bring him to the rescue. . . The activity in connection with fire served to reestablish a lost relationship with the father (p. 286).

Folkman and Siegelman (1971) undertook a pilot study to explore the firesetting behavior in 47 randomly selected normal children ages 6 and 7. In this study, Folkman and Siegelman found that only two boys had come to the attention of the fire service for setting fires. However, 60 percent of the boys and 33 percent of the girls were found to have an interest in fire, which was exhibited by either a self-report of previous firesetting or reporting they had asked to light matches. During this time, the focus expanded to identifying treatment options for juvenile firesetters.

During a California State Psychological Association conference in 1975, a group of fire service personnel and psychologists met to discuss the issue of juvenile firesetting. The reason for this discussion was the fact that both fire service and mental health had been receiving referrals on juvenile firesetters, and neither group knew how to help these children. Out of this meeting, the Fire Service and Arson Prevention Committee was formed to design methods to work with the child firesetters. According to Gaynor and Hatcher (1987), this committee received a grant from the United States Fire Administration to begin work on designing and developing a method to classify juvenile firesetting behavior and to determine the risk of future firesetting in children who have been identified as firesetters. This committee’s work provided the basis for the evaluation and classification system used today with youth firesetters.

Bernard Levin (1976) wrote about the psychological characteristics of firesetters. The main focus of this article was on the adult firesetter; however, he did discuss children and fire by stating:

Most people are fascinated by fire. This fascination starts at an early age and manifests itself in young children playing with matches. While people may not outgrow their basic fascination with fire, normal children learn that playing with matches is not acceptable behavior and discontinue it by the age of five or six. A few children continue to play with matches or deliberately set destructive fires, and their chronic firesetting is an observable symptom of a psychological disturbance. (p. 38)

He went on to discuss two types of treatments used when working with chronic juvenile firesetters. The first treatment discussed by Welsh (1971) was stimulus satiation. This technique requires a firesetter to strike matches for an hour a day until the firesetter is sick of lighting the matches and stops match lighting and / or firesetting. The second treatment is through positive reinforcement that is accompanied with the threat of punishment by loss (Holland, 1969). This technique requires a child to bring any found match packages to his father, who would then give him a reward for his positive behavior. This treatment would cause the child to develop positive non-firesetting behaviors based on the positive reward.

The literature on juvenile firesetting from the 1940s through the 1970s focused either on diagnosis or treatment. During this time, Heath, Gayton and Hardesty (1976) reviewed the literature on juvenile firesetting and found only six journal articles that exclusively discussed juvenile firesetting and 17 articles on issues related to juvenile firesetting. Unfortunately, they were unable to get their literature review article published in the United States, so they relied upon the Canadian Psychiatric Association to publish the literature review in their journal.

However, from the 1980s through today, the literature has proven to be ripe with research on juvenile firesetting, just not specific to the motivations of school firesetters or the phenomenon of school fires.

1980–Today

From the 1980s through today, there have been many different foci of youth firesetter research, including (a) the impact of the environment on the juvenile firesetter’s behavior (Fineman, 1980; Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Vreeland & Waller, 1979); (b) psychiatric disorders as the catalyst for juvenile firesetting (Fineman, 1980; Freud, 1932; Heath et al., 1976; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986; Kuhnley, Henderson, & Quinland, 1982; Lewis & Yarnell, 1951; Williams, 2005; Wooden & Berkey, 1984; Yarnell, 1940); (c) firesetting as a learned behavior (Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986; Vreeland & Waller, 1979); (d) juvenile firesetter assessment and evaluation instruments (Fineman 1980, 1995; Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Sakheim & Osborn, 1994; Slavkin, 2000; Stadolnik, 2000); (e) mental health and educational interventions (Bumpass, Fagelman, & Brix, 1983; Fineman, 1980, 1995; Kolko & Kazdin, 1986, 1991; Sakheim & Osborn, 1994; Stadolnik, 2000; Wooden & Berkey, 1984); and (f) juvenile firesetter motives and typologies (Cotterall, 1999; Fineman, 1980; Gaynor & Hatcher, 1987; Hall, 2006; Kolko & Kazdin, 1991; Meade, 1998; Sakheim & Osborn, 1994; Swaffer & Hollin, 1995; Terjestam & Ryden, 1996). Because the specific focus of this dissertation is on the self-reported motivations of students who set school fires, the following section focuses strictly on the literature regarding firesetter motives and typologies. While the typologies contain anywhere from three to nine categories of firesetter motives, they all range from the curious to the pathological firesetter.

School Fires and Firesetting

According to historical information on school fires, there have been three devastating school fires in the history of the United States. A synopsis of each of these school fires follows. The first school fire occurred on March 4, 1908 at the Lakeview Elementary School in Collinwood, Ohio. The cause of the fire was said to be wood joists coming in contact with an overheated steam pipe that started the fire. This fire killed 172 students and 2 teachers (Gottschalk, 2002). The second devastating school fire occurred on March 18, 1937 in New London, Texas. A disgruntled school employee who had been reprimanded for smoking and wanted to get back at the school administrators started the New London School fire. He tampered with the gas lines so as to run up the school gas bill. An explosion ensued which killed 294 students and staff (Gottschalk, 2002). The third school fire occurred on December 1, 1958 in Chicago, Illinois at the Our Lady of the Angels School. A fifth grade student lighting a cardboard waste barrel in the school basement started this school fire. The fire claimed the lives of 92 students and 3 nuns.

All of these fires caused community devastation, millions of dollars in property loss, and the most precious loss of all, the loss of life. However, only the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School was started by a school student.

According to the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in 2002, there were an estimated 14,300 fires in kindergarten through twelfth grade educational institutions, causing an estimated $103,600,000 in property damage and 122 injuries (FEMA, 2004).

The leading cause of these school fires was incendiary / suspicious activity accounting for 37 percent of all school structure fires. Fifty-two percent of all middle and high school fires have been attributed to incendiary / suspicious activity (FEMA, 2004). The NFIRS report stated that 78 percent of all school fires occur during the school week, and 55 percent of these fires occur between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. when youth are likely to be at school (FEMA, 2004). Today, deaths from school fires are rare, but injuries per fire are higher in school structure fires than nonresidential structure fires on average per the United States Fire Administration (2005). Also according to the USFA (2001), “Each year in the United States, there are an estimated 1,300 fires in high schools, private and prep schools and college dormitories. These fires are responsible for less than 5 deaths, approximately 50 injuries and $4.1 million in property loss annually” (p. 1). But what about in Phoenix, Arizona?

In 2005, there were a total of 99 school fires occurring during school hours in K‑12 educational institutions that were reported to the Phoenix Fire Department’s Youth Firesetter Intervention Program (2006). These reports over the past five years along with the fire at Our Lady of the Angels School prompted research on the motivations of students who set school fires. Are they troubled students who dislike school, as was the case with the fire set at our Our Lady of the Angels School? Do the motivations for student firesetters follow the motivation typologies found in previous research on firesetters? What does previous research say about school firesetters?

School Firesetters

In Lewis and Yarnell’s (1951) study in 1937–1938 of 238 child firesetters, 61 had set fires in either churches or schools (no differentiation between church or school was given). The reasons these firesetters gave for setting their school fires were predominately based on hatred, revenge, and the desire to destroy the school building, hoping that they would no longer have to attend school. Some of their other reasons included the following comments:

* “We didn’t like the looks of the teacher.”
* “I got a bad report card and thought I’d make a fire and blow it up.”
* “I was mad because I didn’t pass.”
* “I was tired of going to school.”
* “The teacher picked on me.” (p. 300)

Some of the secondary reasons these students gave for setting the school fires was to see the fire, see the fire engines, and be the hero that discovered the fire. The researchers went on to say that these children might also vandalize school property, steal from teachers and staff, leave obscene notes on the teacher’s desk, and mutilate the teacher’s clothing. Their classroom behavior and schoolwork was poor at best, and they showed a “predominately dull or borderline intelligence with special learning disabilities, and all of them were unable to compete in the classroom” (p. 300). Lewis and Yarnell (1951) also stated that children under age 10 rarely set school fires and the most frequent age group of school firesetters is between 12 and 14 years of age. In Wooden and Berkey’s (1984) study, they found that the “greatest number of fires (37 percent) set by the delinquent firesetters” were school-related fires (p. 72). The motives for these school fires were found to be “revenge, spite, or disruption of classroom activities” (p. 77). The median age for the school firesetters in Wooden and Berkey’s (1984) study was 14 and the fires were most often set in the classroom, school closets, under the teacher’s desk, or in the wastebasket. They also found that most of the school firesetters were considered trouble-making students and the fires occurred after being punished by a teacher or school administrator. In the body of current literature, only two examples of differing motives appear.

In an article written by Jeff Meade (1998) titled *Fire Power,* while not a study about school firesetters but rather a compilation of information about school fires written for *Education Week,* Meade discussed school firesetting with juvenile firesetter researcher Paul Schwartzman. Schwartzman suggested that there was no one main reason juvenile firesetters target schools; however, he did suggest the following possible motives behind school firesetting:

* A prank
* To get out of final exams
* Peer pressure
* Seeking attention

Other possible motives behind school firesetting discussed by Meade (1998) include revenge, school disruption, anger, or no explanation at all. Hall (2006) reported that “deliberate fires in schools are often a result of mucking about which gets out of hand” (p. 2). However, according to Hall’s report, Dr. Jack Kennedy, a clinical forensic psychologist, reverted to a pathological explanation, asserting that there was a deeper reason for school fires. Kennedy stated,

For children, school is normally a focal point for their social world. So that’s where they’re going to be exposed to frustrations, to issues of tolerance and anger. And because they place social controls on children, schools—unfortunately—often annoy them, cause them to be disgruntled, or to feel hard done by. The results can be starting a fire to vent anger, or exact revenge against the school, or against the teacher. It’s rare that there is not some sort of trail or story behind a fire at school. Fires may be like a friend to some of these children—the one thing they feel gives them some power (Hall, 2006, pp. 2-3).

As has been evidenced by the scant research that focuses specifically on school firesetters, little is known about the motivations behind school fires. In Lewis and Yarnell’s (1951) research, all of the school firesetters had “predominately dull or borderline intelligence with special learning disabilities and all of them were unable to compete in the classroom” (p. 300). In Wooden and Berkey’s study in 1984, all of the school firesetters were troubled students who set school fires after a teacher or school administrator had punished them. Meade and Hall speculated about the motives of school firesetters but undertook no actual research to support their hypotheses

(This information was taken from the following source: Boberg, J. (2006). *An exploratory case study of the self-reported motivations of students who set school fire.* Flagstaff, AZ; NAU) (Chapter 2)

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