

YOUTH-SET FIRES ARE NOT CHILD'S PLAY

Criminal justice and forensic professionals play a key role in identifying and addressing youth firesetting by helping children to receive the help and treatment needed. US forensics researcher Don Porth and his colleagues outline the key points to consider when addressing youth-set fires in the juvenile justice system. (Authors: Don Porth, Jerrod Brown, Kathi Osmonson and Janina Cich)

Every year hundreds of youth die in fires that they set themselves. Some of these fires are set unintentionally while others may be set with deliberate intent to destroy property and harm others.

In fact, young people account for a significant number of arson arrests every year worldwide. In addition to the lives lost, these fires also create millions of dollars in property damage every year.

As such, youth firesetters are a clear threat to themselves and the public. Despite the gravity of this issue, youth who start fires are not often arrested because they are younger than the state's age of accountability or the fire may be set in their home and the parents would not press charges.

INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

As a result of this lack of identification, many children do not receive the firesetting interventions that they need. All fires start small. Just because a fire was "only small" does not mean that it is not a big deal. Diversion (intervention) programmes are very effective in changing the behavior of children who set fires.

Criminal justice and forensic professionals play a key role in identifying and addressing youth firesetting by helping children receive help and treatment. A successful intervention is multidisciplinary in nature and includes a baseline assessment of recidivism risk.

Factors for successful intervention include fire education, a mental health evaluation and possible referrals to mental healthcare providers, a restorative justice component, and subsequent check-ins to confirm that the firesetting behaviour has stopped. These factors are as follows:

1. Identification: It may be difficult to identify youth who need youth-fire intervention. The family may minimise the seriousness of small fires and their children's behaviour or prefer to avoid initiating legal consequences for their child. Further more, law enforcement officials may decide that an extinguished fire is not worth reporting. Alternatively, criminal justice professionals may



decide that adjudicating the youth is not worth the effort if the fire was the first offense and minimal damage occurred, thus not meeting the criteria for an arson charge. In a different arena, mental health and medical professionals may not even inquire if their young client is starting fires.

2. Diversion: All young people who start fires can benefit from multidisciplinary intervention. Punishment alone is not an effective diversion, and locking youths up can cement rather than change behaviour. Rather than an indictment, juvenile justice professionals can divert youth firesetters into youth fire intervention programmes. Youth-fire intervention programmes may not be available in all communities and care must be taken when searching for one.

Most firefighters are not trained to provide this kind of specialised education. Therefore, a trip to the local fire station for a tour and a talk with a firefighter will fall short of

YOUTH FIRESETTING

a true intervention programme. To be comprehensive in nature, one should look for a programme that has a specialist in this field of work and can identify the unique nature of the curriculum and intended outcomes.

Firesetting: Intervention programmes typically consist of a baseline assessment to determine the risk for re-offending, fire science education, and often a referral to mental health care. Effective diversion programmes can limit the likelihood of repeat offending.

3. Assessment: Criminal justice and forensic professionals often lack the appropriate awareness and training necessary to accurately detect and treat problematic firesetters. As such, appropriate and comprehensive screening and assessment is strongly encouraged in order to accurately treat the adolescent's unique and often challenging needs.

As mentioned above, a baseline assessment will help determine the risk of re-offending. An appropriate assessment tool consists of a questionnaire for the family about family dynamics and potential family crisis, previous firesetting behaviour, and the youth's personality and mental health.

The assessment should also include a questionnaire for the youth about fire interest and motivations for starting the fire(s). Most of the available assessment tools provide score-based recommendations for intervention strategies. Higher risk youth should be prioritised for quicker entry into diversion programmes.

4. Fire Education: Fire service professionals are best suited to provide the firesetter and his/her family with accurate fire science education. Fire science, prevention and safety, the consequences of fire, and appropriate behaviours with fire are critical components of education.

Fire survival skills, such as escape planning and smoke alarm details, can also be included. Most citizens do not understand the power of fire, and the media misrepresents and glorifies fire in advertising, television, movies, and social media.

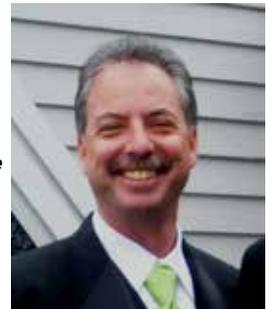
Unfortunately, in many cases, people learn about fire behaviour from the media instead of personal experience. As such, it is important to teach the true science of fire to youth with firesetting behaviours.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

***Don Porth** holds a BS degree in Fire Command Administration. He began his career in the fire service in 1980 as a volunteer firefighter in a rural Oregon community, becoming a full-time firefighter/EMT in 1983 and served 28 years in the uniformed fire service for 27 years at Portland (Oregon) Fire & Rescue.*

The majority of the time was spent as a public education officer, providing public outreach and education on fire and life safety prevention issues. Within this, he specialised in youth firesetting behaviours and interventions.

He now works as a consultant on fire and life safety issues and has participated on the executive team of an effort known as YFIRES (Youth Firesetting Information Repository and Evaluation System).



***Jerrold Brown, MA, MS, MS, MS,** is the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programmes and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. He is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS). Jerrod is currently in the dissertation phase of his doctorate degree programme in psychology.*



***Kathi Osmonson** is deputy state fire marshal and runs the Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention (YFPI) programme for the State of Minnesota. She partners with law enforcement, mental health, justice and social agencies to sustain a network of professionals who collaborate to provide prevention and intervention for young firesetters.*

Osmonson's career includes volunteer and career firefighting with specialties in fire prevention education and youth firesetting intervention. She is a member of the NFPA 1035 Committee and the Minnesota Juvenile Justice Coalition (JJC), an adjunct instructor for the FEMA National Fire Academy and the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities System, and a stakeholder in the Youth Fire Intervention Repository and Evaluation System. Osmonson is the creator of the Minnesota Youth Firesetting Prevention & Intervention Certification through the Minnesota Fire Service Certification Board.



***Janina Cich, MA,** is a retired law enforcement officer with two decades of criminal justice experience. She is an Adjunct CJ and FMH Professor and Lecturer, and Chief Operating Officer of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS). She has co-authored several FMH articles, and is a board member of the Midwest Alliance on Shaken Baby Syndrome (MASBS).*



5. Mental Health Considerations: A youth who start fires often needs a referral to a mental healthcare professional. These youth often have mental health conditions and limited impulse control.

The fire incident may be their first introduction into the mental health system and serve as a valuable opportunity for them to help address their condition.

When a youth is already in treatment, the intervention specialist often works with the mental health care professional to coordinate a successful intervention plan.

6. Restorative Justice:

Restorative Justice can help the youth and victim to heal following the fire incident. The healing process could include a thoughtful apology letter or helping to restore that which was destroyed in the fire, such as helping to paint a church that may have been destroyed as a result of a youth-set fire. Probation officers and the juvenile justice system can help by mandating participation and helping with the restorative justice practices.

7. Follow-up:

Interviewing the family at six, 12 and 18 months after an intervention is critical to confirm behaviour change. This can be difficult in light of the transient nature of many families of firesetters. Follow-up is an important measure in evaluating the family's change in behaviour.

Although curiosity about fire is normal,

youth firesetting behaviour is expensive and can be deadly. Without intervention, many may continue to set fires, yet most will not reoffend if they participate in a youth fire intervention programme.

These findings highlight the importance of diversion programmes for youth firesetters. They also emphasise the importance of criminal justice and forensic professionals in the identification and treatment aspects of this process.

