



# Creating a firestorm: A review of children who deliberately light fires

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## ABSTRACT

Deliberate firesetting is a significant social problem that causes millions of dollars of property damage each year. Of particular concern is that a high proportion of these arson offences are committed by children and adolescents. Youth firesetters are a unique and diverse group, variant in their motivations, needs and behavior and distinct from their adult counterparts.

The study of firesetting has been approached in a number of ways and thus the existing body of research lacks a coherent, consistent and comprehensive set of empirical findings. In synthesizing the literature on child and adolescent firesetting, this review considers the potential relationships between firesetting typologies, risk factors, development and treatment. It considers the extent to which firesetting can be considered within the framework of antisocial behavior and what implications such a relationship may have for clinical practice. The review concludes that despite a number of risk factors being repeatedly identified, an understanding of the etiology behind firesetting behavior and potential developmental trajectories remain theoretically rather than empirically based. Existing typological theories do not take sufficient account of the complexities of firesetting behavior and there is not yet a typology and accompanying assessment that has undergone thorough empirical testing and is of significant clinical utility. Despite indications that the relationship between firesetting and antisocial behavior is of a serious nature, there has been a general lack of attention to this in literature and practice. Attention to this relationship is necessary not just in the area of firesetting research and practice but also amongst those working with youth with behavioral difficulties and conduct problems as for these individuals firesetting is likely to indicate particularly high risk for severity of behavior and future offending. Because of this relationship and the diversity of firesetting populations there is a need for collaborative intervention for firesetters that includes thorough assessment and provides an individualized, and developmentally appropriate approach best suited to the needs of the individual. This review reflects on the methodological limitations as well as clinical implications of existing studies and suggests necessary directions for future research.

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## Contents

1.	Introduction . . . . .	308
2.	Prevalence and cost . . . . .	308
3.	Typologies . . . . .	308
3.1.	Child vs. adolescent . . . . .	309
3.2.	Motivational typologies . . . . .	309
3.3.	Del Bove's empirically derived typology. . . . .	309
3.3.1.	Conventional-limited (CL). . . . .	310
3.3.2.	Home-instability-moderate (HM) . . . . .	310
3.3.3.	Multi-risk Persistent (MP). . . . .	310
3.4.	Summary of typologies . . . . .	310
4.	Factors associated with firesetting behavior . . . . .	311
4.1.	Gender . . . . .	311
4.2.	Family dysfunction . . . . .	311
4.3.	Abuse. . . . .	311
4.4.	Individual characteristics. . . . .	311

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4.5.	Anger, hostility and aggression . . . . .	316
4.6.	Firesetting history . . . . .	316
4.7.	Fire interest . . . . .	316
4.8.	Fire incident variables . . . . .	316
4.9.	The antisocial nature of firesetting behavior . . . . .	317
4.10.	Developmental factors impacting upon the risk of firesetting . . . . .	317
4.11.	Summary of risk factors . . . . .	319
5.	Treatment . . . . .	319
5.1.	Assessment . . . . .	319
5.2.	Educational interventions. . . . .	319
5.3.	Mental health interventions . . . . .	320
5.4.	Integrative treatment. . . . .	320
5.5.	Efficacy of treatment . . . . .	321
5.6.	Summary of interventions . . . . .	323
6.	Methodological limitations . . . . .	324
6.1.	Samples . . . . .	324
6.2.	Constructs and measures . . . . .	324
6.3.	Development and causality . . . . .	324
6.4.	Limitations in intervention and recidivism studies . . . . .	324
7.	Clinical implications and directions for future research . . . . .	325
8.	Conclusion . . . . .	325
	Acknowledgements . . . . .	326
	References . . . . .	326

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this literature review is to consider existing research, theory and practice regarding child and adolescent firesetters. For the purposes of this review the term ‘firesetting’ encompasses all deliberate setting of fires and the term ‘firesetters’ refers to children and adolescents who engage in firesetting behavior. Such a broad definition has been adopted so as to best encompass the various firesetting populations which have been the subject of research efforts, as well as the diversity of those who are likely to be referred to fireservice intervention programs, mental health or justice agencies as a result of firesetting behavior.

Firesetting has been approached by researchers in a myriad of ways and consequently lacks a coherent, consistent and comprehensive set of empirical findings. This literature review aims to provide an overview of contemporary, and currently relevant research, and to consider the relationships between, as well as strengths and weaknesses of theorized and empirically validated firesetting typologies, risk factors, developmental theory, and intervention approaches. While acknowledging the methodological limitations of relevant studies, this review aims to consider the implications of the existing body of literature for both fireservice based programs and mental health practice with firesetters, and to suggest directions for future research in this field.

This review does not intend to be an exhaustive summary of all literature concerning firesetting behavior. Rather, with a focus on literature published within the past 20 years, it endeavors to consider the recurring themes and to select for discussion the most methodologically sound research and that which has the greatest implications for current practice with firesetters. The primary databases used to search for literature were *PsychInfo*, *Medline*, *Eric* and *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, and only literature published since 1990, unless of particular importance, was included in this review.

## 2. Prevalence and cost

Community sample studies indicate that firesetting occurs in around 5–10% of children and adolescents (Chen, Arria, & Anthony, 2003; Dadds & Fraser, 2006; Martin, Bergen, Richardson, Roegar, & Allison, 2004). However, far higher prevalence rates have been reported in two recent adolescent community sample studies, with just under a third of these populations reporting engagement in firesetting behavior in the past year

(Del Bove, Caprara, Pastorelli, & Paciello, 2008, MacKay, Paglia-Boak, Henderson, Marton, & Adlaf, 2009). Differences in firesetting prevalence rates found in community studies are likely to reflect variation in research methodologies and measures of ‘firesetting’.

Youth are shown to consistently account for a large percentage of arson offences in a range of national statistics and the costs and damage incurred are extensive. In the United States, children 10 years of age or under account for a greater percentage of arson arrests than for any other crime (Hall, 2007). In 2009 45% of arson arrestees in the United States were under the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, 40% of arson offences in 2000 were perpetrated by young people between 10 and 17 years of age (Arson Prevention Bureau, 2003) and in New Zealand for the year 2007/8, those under 21 years of age accounted for 73% of all apprehensions for arson and under 17 for 55.6% (Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

However, of all offences committed by adolescents, arson rates remain low. In the United States in 2009 arson arrests under the age of 18 accounted for only 1.3% of property crime and only 0.3% of all arrests under the age of 18. Similarly, in New Zealand in 2007, while there were 38,563 apprehensions of under 17 year olds, only 471 (1.2%) of these were for arson (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2008).

While studies show extremely variant rates of recidivism dependent on sample population, presence of intervention, definition of recidivism and follow-up period, it is apparent that a significant number of firesetters engage in recidivistic behavior. Studies that address recidivism show rates of up to 59% (Kolko, Day, Bridge, & Kazdin, 2001; Kolko & Kazdin, 1992; MacKay et al., 2006). In a recent community sample of adolescents, just under 50% of those who reported firesetting reported 3 or more episodes in the past year (MacKay et al., 2009). Similarly, another recent community study found that at initial assessment 40% of firesetters reported recurrent firesetting at initial assessment and 15% reported engagement in recidivism during a 2–4 year follow-up period (Del Bove et al., 2008).

Such findings indicate that firesetting is not only a damaging and costly behavior, but that it is also often a persistent one and thus poses a serious problem for fire service and mental health practitioners.

## 3. Typologies

Child and adolescent firesetters are a very diverse group, exhibiting extensive variation in their backgrounds, firesetting

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