



# Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

## Arson Curriculum: Motives Associated with Serial Arson

No. FI-2011-2 April 15, 2011

**Learning Objective:** The student will be able to identify the most common motives associated with serial arson and the most effective investigative strategy to successfully solve and prosecute cases.

Many communities across the country are experiencing a rash of serial arson-related fires. These types of fires are plaguing many rural and urban communities causing significant loss of life and billions of dollars in property damage, adding to the suffering already being caused by the current economic climate. *Serial arson* is defined as an offense committed by fire setters who set three or more fires with a significant cooling off period between the fires. *Serial arsonists* generally set fires for the same reason as other arsonists. The most common motives include:



Establishing partnerships and working together to share information and resources is critical to the successful investigation and prosecution of arson cases.

- **Vandalism** – Malicious or mischievous fire setting that results in damage to property. The most common target being schools and educational facilities and property.
- **Excitement** – Motivated by excitement include seekers of thrills, attention, recognition. Favorite targets include trash, dumpsters, vacant houses, and occupied structures.
- **Revenge** – Fires set in retaliation for some injustice, real or imagined, perceived by the offender. All types of targets including vehicles, residential structures, and property.
- **Crime Concealment** – Fires are set for the purpose of covering up a murder or burglary or to eliminate evidence left at a crime scene. Other examples include fires set to destroy business records to conceal cases of embezzlement and the many cases of auto theft arson where the fire is set to destroy evidence.
- **Profit** – Offenders expect to profit from their fire setting, either directly for monetary gain or more indirectly to profit from a goal other than money. Examples of direct monetary gain include insurance fraud liquidating property, dissolving businesses, destroying inventory, parcel clearance, or to gain employment. Targets range from personal property to commercial buildings to people (e.g., children murdered by their parents to collect insurance proceeds).
- **Extremism** – Fires set to further social, political, or religious causes. Examples of extremist motivated targets include abortion clinics and animal laboratories. The targets of political terrorists reflect the focus of the terrorists' wrath.

Traditionally, the most effective investigative strategies have been based on a team or task force approach that leverages the resources of the fire service, law enforcement, the insurance industry and the community. Fire investigation, like other criminal investigations, benefits from organized teamwork, consistent practices and a logical investigative process tailored to individual crime scenes based on a witness-driven protocol using case solvability factors. This standard investigative protocol is critical to effectively investigating, solving, and consistently securing convictions in serial arson cases.

For more information regarding the U.S. Fire Administration's Arson Awareness Week, go to [www.usfa.fema.gov/aaw](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/aaw)

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