

Factsheet 2: Arson

What is arson?

Arson is the crime of setting fire with the intent to cause damage. Deliberately setting light to buildings and cars can put people's lives at risk. Although it seems less dangerous, setting fire to rubbish, dumped furniture or recycling bins can spread fire quickly to nearby property or fencing.

Arson is against the law. Anyone found guilty of setting fires on purpose could face a prison sentence.

The law

Arson is, strictly speaking, a criminal act defined by the Criminal Damage Act 1971 and only offences that meet the definition of the Act can properly be termed arson. The act of arson is also an anti-social activity, which is defined in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

Some facts and figures about arson

1. Arson can be defined as the wilful, or deliberate, setting fire to another's house, car or similar property. Arson is the largest single cause of major fires in the UK and has attracted increasing and critical attention to efforts to tackle it. At its worst, arson leads to loss of life and significant

financial damage, but persistent and pervasive minor fire setting also sets a strongly detrimental (and visually harmful) tone to deprived communities. In some areas, arson now accounts for 70% of all fires attended by the Fire and Rescue Service, rising to 82% in certain localities.

2. Arson is a complex and serious crime and carries a maximum punishment of a life sentence. It has a wide variety of causes: vandalism; playing with fire; crime concealment; revenge; fraud; and mental illness to name just a few. The number of deliberate primary fires (i.e. those involving injury or death and/or loss of property) attended by the Fire and Rescue Service in 2004/05 was 72,700. This is down 22% compared with the previous year. Many deliberate fires occur in road vehicles (44,400 such fires in 2004/05). The Government has introduced an improved vehicle licensing regime and sponsors many vehicle removal schemes to address this issue.

Arson – the key facts

Scale of the problem

- There were 72,700 deliberate primary fires in 2004/05.
- From 1998 to the peak in 2001 deliberate fires rose by 46%; between 2001 and 2004

there was a 26% fall. If the downward trend continues there are likely to be fewer deliberate fires in 2005 than in 1995.

- The rise and fall has largely been due to patterns in deliberate road vehicle fires, which rose from 40,100 in 1998 to 67,200 in 2001 before falling to 46,400 in 2004. In other words, in 2001 there were 32,200 more deliberate fires compared with three years earlier; of these, 27,100 – 84% of the rise – occurred in road vehicles.
- In the last decade there have been over 835,000 deliberate fires in England, resulting in 900 fatalities and 25,000 injuries.
- Over half of fatalities and two-thirds of non-fatal casualties occur in deliberate fires set in the home.
- Every week arson results in about 2,200 deliberate primary fires, 63 injuries and two deaths and a cost to society of over £42 million.

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Financial cost

- The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister report *The Economic Cost of Fire* puts the cost of arson to the economy in England and Wales at £2.4 billion per year, with the cost of fire as a whole to the economy at £7.0 billion.
- British business insured fire losses were £812 million in 2004.
- Arson is thought to account for over half of the total insured property losses – perhaps £400 million per year.

Social costs – schools and education

- There were 1,100 fires in schools in 2004/05. Of these, 590 were deliberate.
- Every week 10 schools suffer an arson attack.
- This means three schools suffer some form of arson attack every two days.
- School fires cost the insurers £70 million in 2005.
- Thirty-five per cent of deliberate school fires occur in the seven metropolitan counties: Merseyside, Manchester, Tyne and Wear, Greater London, West Midlands, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire.
- Eighty-four per cent of schools that suffer an arson attack will have a history of other criminal damage.

- Related costs incurred as a result of school fires have increased by more than 170% over the last 10 years.
- The estimated average number of pupils affected by large school fires is between 90,000 and 100,000 per year as a result of destruction and damage of classrooms and school property.
- A third of all school fires now occur during normal school hours.
- Only about 150 schools (out of 28,000 schools in UK) are fitted with sprinklers.

Social costs – communities

- Those living on the lowest income are 31 times more likely to suffer an arson attack and 16 times more likely to die in a fire than those on higher incomes.
- Many businesses never recover – losing orders, contracts and key employees – and may go out of business, resulting in lost jobs and services to the community.
- There were 44,400 deliberate vehicle fires in 2004/05, resulting in 20 deaths and about 80 injuries.
- Deliberate vehicle fires cost the insurers around £77 million per year.

- Derelict or empty properties are damaged.
- The local environment is blighted.

Fire setters

- Most arson is committed by males. Of the 747 arsonists sentenced in the Magistrates' Courts in 2003, 80% (580) were male. In the Crown Court, 87% of defendants were male.
- Two-thirds of offenders sentenced in Magistrates' Courts are under 18, compared with only 11% of those sentenced in the higher court.
- Over half of arsonists convicted in the courts are under 21.
- Most deliberate school fires are thought to be carried out by pupils, ex-pupils or those living close to the school.
- Arson attacks by children excluded from school are thought to be almost double those of children still in mainstream education.
- Forty-five per cent of deliberate vehicle fires are thought to be to cover up criminal activity.

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