

3.2 - Arson

Arson as a cause of fire

In 2004, fires due to arson constituted 43% of all fires. The Home Office figures on Arson Control (2004) gave the following facts on arson, for **each week** there are:

- 2,000 deliberately started fires.
- 50 injuries.
- 2 deaths.
- Cost to society of at least £55 million.

Commercial buildings alone have:

- 16,100 fires per year, averaging nearly 310 per week.
- 46 businesses per day are affected by arson.

MOTIVES FOR ARSON

There are many reasons why arson is committed. The principal motives are:

- Vandalism / Boredom.
- Concealment of another crime.
- Insurance fraud.
- Jealous competitor.
- Pyromaniac.
- Attention seeking.

SIGNS OF AN ARSON ATTACK

The Fire and Rescue Service and the police have investigators who specialise in detecting arson. The following signs will generally indicate a fire was caused by arson:

- Multiple seats of fire.
- Use of accelerants.
- Forced entry.
- Fire in an unnatural position.
- Movement of goods / combustibles prior to fire.
- Disablement of fire detection / extinguishment systems.

Although not an actual sign, the history of events and things like closed circuit television (CCTV) footage will assist in the investigation.

As part of the management of fire safety within an organisation arson prevention should be a consideration.

Factors influencing the severity and frequency of an arson attack

LOCATION

Many factors affect the potential for an arson attack, one of these being the location of the premises. It would appear that many arson attacks are related to general societal problems. Premises built in a run down inner city area are statistically at much greater risk of arson than if they are sited in a rural setting. The position of the building in relationship to the public roadway and the frequency of people passing by it, will all affect the risk of an arson attack. It is vital that the responsible person for a building or premises keeps abreast of what is happening in the local area. For example, if the adjoining land has become wasteland and is then regularly used by the local youths as a playground, this can increase the risk of arson. History has shown that in a short period of time, often resulting from boredom, someone will trespass onto the land and may set fire to rubbish bins, skips, vehicles or the building itself.

SECURITY

Simple but effective ways to deter the arsonist are by giving attention to security, both external and internal, which should encompass the following:

External security

- Control of people having access to the building/site.
- Use of patrol guards.
- Lighting the premises at night.
- Safety of keys.
- Structural protection.
- Siting of rubbish bins at least 8m from buildings.

Internal security

- Good housekeeping.
- Inspections.
- Clear access routes.
- Visitor supervision.
- Control of sub-contractors.
- Audits.



Figure 3-15: Control arson by external security. *Source: ACT.*



Figure 3-16: Access control, internal security. *Source: ACT.*

See also - 'Actions to prevent arson attack' as some security measures are also covered within this heading - later in this element.

ACCESS CONTROL

In addition to the general site security access control should be considered as a precaution to limit the risk of arson. This is especially important during the working day when buildings are often unlocked, enabling an arsonist easy access onto the site. Whatever form of access control is installed must however not detract from the requirement for means of escape for anyone inside the building. If the access control equipment (door locks) is worked electronically then it must 'Failsafe' (to open) in the event of a fire alarm being operated, or on power failure. Often this particular point is not physically checked, and there is a risk of people being locked in buildings in the event of a fire.

Actions to prevent arson attack

- Train management to be prepared for arson attacks.
- Address perimeter security with suitable fencing and gates if possible.
- Secure access into the premises - consider roller shutters to external doors/windows.
- Consider active measures such as close circuit television, intruder alarms, night time illumination.
- Never store combustible materials such as pallets, vehicles, against external walls of the premises. Keep external storage to a minimum.
- Ensure skips, etc. are stored as far away from premises as possible - preferably more than 8 metres. Arrange speedy removal of skips.
- Secure wheeled waste bins in designated positions with chains or similar - arrange for bins to be emptied regularly.
- Prevent bushes, tree growth, etc. close to your premises - a dry period will turn such vegetation into a good source of fuel for the arsonist.
- Beware of children gaining access to the site, particularly during school holidays.
- Consider also if your premises front a street:
 - Gaps under doors into a street should be as narrow as possible to stop lighted paper being pushed under them.
 - Install fire resisting mail cabinets to the inside of letterboxes.
 - Air vents and other openings are very vulnerable to attack with flammable liquids particularly if at easily accessible heights. Any such vents should be removed to inaccessible areas or positions.
 - Security should not impede escape for persons in the premises in the event of fire.
 - Always check with your insurance company as they may have specific requirements that must be addressed.
 - Advice should be sought from the Local Authority (Planning Department) in respect of fencing suitability and before fitting roller shutters to windows or doors.



Figure 3-17: Poor siting of skip. *Source: FST.*