

Arson is a serious crime in terms of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)/Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) standards; it is categorized as a Part I/Index crime. According to Winslow and Zhang, the FBI did not seriously consider arson an Index crime until around 1978, when it was realized that incidents of arson had increased more than 3,100% between the years 1951 and 1977. Thus, the authorities at the U.S. Department of Justice in charge of the FBI and UCR decided that arson should be added to the other seven Index crimes. The FBI definition of arson is “any willful or malicious burning or attempting to burn, with or without intent to defraud, a dwelling house, public building, motor vehicle, or aircraft, personal property of another, etc.” As you can see, this is a wide definition, which is why there are so many different types of arson. After all, some youths start fires for excitement, some business owners start fires to cash in on insurance claims, and pyromaniacs light fires to fulfill a psychological compulsion to burn things, whereas others burn crime scenes to destroy evidence or to get revenge on others. There are even more reasons to start illegal fires, but they all fall under this category of arson.

The reason why we are discussing arson in this chapter is because it is the only Part I/Index offense primarily committed by young people (under 14). The vast majority

of arsonists are male. Furthermore, early onset of offending (a key factor of the developmental perspective) is often seen in an act of arson—“boys playing with fire.” And although such youths often do not realize the implications of their actions, it still often causes much property damage and sometimes costs lives. Given the prevalence and clustering of arson in young ages, we are discussing it in this chapter; however, the act of arson spans a variety of ages and motives.

According to recent reports by the FBI, there were about 42,934 official reports/incidents of arson in the United States in 2014. The average damage/loss due to arson in that year was \$16,055. Arsons involving structures (e.g., residential, public, storage) accounted for about 45% of the total, whereas mobile property (e.g., vehicles) and other types of property (e.g., crops, fences) accounted for about 23% and 31%, respectively. This shows the need for further prevention of this Index offense and reveals why it is a top priority for the FBI and other agencies in the federal government.

Perhaps this is why many programs have been formed to prevent arson, especially among youths. Various types of intervention programs have been started to try to curb high-risk “fire-setters.” And, as mentioned before, this is one of the early predictors or “red flags”

that developmental/life-course researchers examine in determining the likelihood someone will become a chronic offender. As many readers have likely heard, serial killers often have a history of cruelty toward domesticated animals (such as dogs and cats), or a history of bed-wetting. Early engagement in arson is another of these early key predictors of a chronic criminal career, such as in the case of David “Son of Sam” Berkowitz, who killed at least six victims and wounded seven others with a .44 caliber handgun over the course of about a year (1976–1977) in New York City. Berkowitz had a long record of committing arsons earlier in his life.

On the other hand, some youths simply are bored or are being experimental and don’t ever intend harm to anyone or anything. However, early incidents of arson are certainly a “red flag” in developmental theory and should be taken seriously.

### THINK ABOUT IT

1. How do you see arson as a “red flag” for predicting habitual offending in the future?
2. Do you think arson should be considered one of the key Index/Part I offenses by the FBI in their annual national index of offending? Why or why not?