

Arson and Vandalism

Arson and vandalism, like theft, are crimes of opportunity. That is, in most cases the person committing the crime does not usually leave his or her home and head for the school with the specific intent of destroying a large part of the building by fire or other means. However, given the right set of circumstances, serious fire or other damage will usually occur. What are the circumstances?

There can be two introductory situations that lead to trouble.

The first and probably most important is easy access to the interior of the building when it is normally closed to students.

This can happen on weekends or holidays when the building is unoccupied or it can happen during vacation periods when the normal staffing is sharply reduced and concentrated in small areas, leaving the rest of the building unsupervised.

The second is the availability of potentially damaging materials left around a school.

These might include combustibles such as leaves or trash that have accumulated and can be used to easily start a fire against a portion of the building that can burn, such as a wooden door, or be collected and dumped into an open window and then set a fire. In one case an elementary age child went to his school on a Saturday afternoon to play baseball. Finding no one to play with and being alone, he promptly started picking up golf ball size rocks and hit them toward the school with his baseball bat. He managed to shatter eighty-seven panes of glass with such force that in some rooms the battered rocks damaged the chalkboards on the opposite wall. In this case, a developed and wellmaintained turf would have provided more than good appearance and safety from falling accidents.

Large trash receptacles left open and full over holidays and weekends also present opportunities for arson, as well as providing a means to climb to low roofs or open windows when they are placed against the building. Bicycle racks that can be upended also make good ladders, as do shed-like storage structures placed against the building.

Once in the building and undetected, the next step for the intruder is to find out how many different rooms can be entered and explored. Again, if opportunity presents itself in the form of access to flammables such as, paper goods, combustible art supplies or even chemicals, a serious fire can ensue. The intruder may also be caught by his or own ignorance and be seriously injured or killed in the fire or in the rush to escape. Additionally, unlocked food storage areas or refrigerators and freezers provide a real opportunity for significant loss in terms of spoilage or contamination.

Many cases of serious vandalism such as the destruction of expensive equipment or furnishings also result in arson as the intruder attempts to cover his or her involvement by creating the diversion of a fire.

Another unintended, but equally serious loss associated with vandalism occurs where windows near water lines are broken or left open in freezing weather. The cold admitted by the lack of closure freezes the water, which subsequently bursts, and floods the area in which it is located. One school district lost a room full of supplies and books in this way. The escaping water was unseen and absorbed by the materials stacked on the floor until it was too late to save anything.

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We do not suggest that all school losses associated with vandalism and arson are the result of mere curiosity and “accidental”. **Certain school fires are deliberately set by young arsonists whose purpose is revenge or the postponement of a school experience anticipated to be unpleasant.** These youngsters, usually boys between the ages of eight and fourteen, set aggressive fires because of their problems with authority figures. We seem to do a less than adequate job of identifying and working with such children. Girls on the other hand are typically responsible for wastebasket fires during the school day to avoid a test or cover their failure to complete an assignment. They often “discover” the fire and assist in its control. These can happen in a toilet, corridor, or even in the classroom.

Prevention and Control

The prevention and control of vandalism and arson is best accomplished with a well developed plan that takes into account building characteristics and the condition of the surrounding grounds, the effective utilization of the staff and assistance from community resources, as well as intrusion barriers or alarm systems.

Another important activity is the gathering of data about building intrusions or loitering on school grounds. It has been clearly demonstrated that major fires or other acts of vandalism have been preceded by less noteworthy building intrusions or evidence of loitering.

One way this can be done is by having a custodian in each building make an inspection of that building and its immediate perimeter each morning to reveal any evidence of unwarranted activity. Several burnt matches on the floor in any area, disturbed supplies or equipment, open desk drawers or lockers, unusual litter are all signs of possible illegal entry and should be acted upon quickly. Empty soda or beer containers, cigarettes or matches and other evidence of exterior loitering should be noted with a call to the police for added surveillance.

When it becomes common knowledge among students that the school is easy to enter or that a location near a school is a good place to “hang out”, traffic will increase steadily and the chance of a major property loss rises dramatically.

Such building condition reports should be in writing, find their way to the central office and be studied for evidence of trends in undesirable activity.

Consideration should also be given to expenditures for a security system. While the cost may seem excessive, a brief discussion with any administrator who has had to work his or her way through a major property loss will be convincing. And this does not take into account the lost or diminished educational opportunity for the affected students. More and more school districts are coming to the conclusion that a security system is an essential element in the plan to protect district property and the investment in the children’s future.

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Arson and Vandalism Program Tips

1. A first step must be approval by the governing body of a positive attitude or policy against acts of vandalism. The policy statement should recognize that that acts of vandalism are crimes against the community, and declare that all acts of vandalism against property will be prosecuted to the fullest extent possible under the law.
2. Identify those staff members who will be responsible for the effective administration of the program.
3. Provide a basis for the fullest possible cooperation between all responsible administrators and those agencies responsible for detection, apprehension and prosecution of vandals.
4. Report of all acts of vandalism to the Governing Body in public session both on an annual basis and in special cases of unusual or costly acts of vandalism without jeopardizing the responsible individual(s) apprehended for such crimes.
5. Recommend to the Governing Body any action which that body may appropriately take to reduce the incidence of vandalism and protect the public property of the persons who lawfully occupy such property.
6. Limit access to your buildings to those pupils, public and staff that have a legitimate purpose in being there.
7. Exercise effective control and supervision over those who are allowed in your buildings.
8. Account for and verify that everyone is out of the building when the building is closed for the day, coaches and others who supervise pupil activities late in the day or in the evening should not leave before all the students have left, including those who must use the phone, loiter in locker rooms or toilets and other reasons lag behind.
9. Assign specific responsibility to the custodial staff, preferably one person in each building, to be sure that all windows, doors and other access ways are securely closed and locked before leaving.
10. Collect and secure all trash and other loose combustible materials so they are placed in outside containers with covers such as dumpsters.
11. Deny access to roof areas by assuring that vehicles or other objects are not placed close to the building which makes it easily used for climbing.
12. Maintain interior and exterior lighting in such a way as to discourage loitering and reveal intruders by sight from the outside.
13. Verify that police authorities or school personnel are scheduled for drive around inspections at irregular intervals.
14. Provide adequate illumination and ease of visibility to courtyards, cul-de-sacs and other places not readily visible from the outside of the building.

Be alert to school and community problems which may heighten the risk of fire such as reasons for pupils and their parents to harbor strong negative attitudes toward the schools. This is the most frequent motivation for deliberate arson.