



U.S. Fire Administration

National Arson Awareness Week

Vehicle Arson: Who Pays for this Crime? / Media Kit

May 6-12, 2007



FEMA

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Vehicle Arson: Who Pays for this Crime?

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) announces this year's Arson Awareness Week: "Vehicle Arson: Who Pays for this Crime?"

The goal of this year's Arson Awareness Week is to focus public attention on vehicle arson. By drawing people's attention to the astounding statistics about Vehicle Arson, we hope to expand the resources and support necessary to reduce this crime.

According to 2004 data from the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association, 36,000 intentionally set vehicle fires occurred, an increase of 18 percent from the previous year. Vehicle arson accounted for \$165,000,000 in property damage, an increase of 25.0 percent from the previous year. Vehicle arson accounted for 29.0 percent of all arsons.

The 2004 Uniform Crime Report from the U.S. Department of Justice states that arson has one of the lowest clearance rates of any major crime. The national rate for arson in 2004 was 17.1 percent. Motor vehicle clearances were lower at 7.4 percent.

Meanwhile, nearly 20 percent of all arsons occur in vehicles; arson is the second-highest cause of vehicle fires.

"Far from being a 'victimless crime,' arson is expensive--in pass-along costs and frequently in human life," said John Eager, senior director of claims for the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America. "The most recent statistics show that the number of suspicious vehicle fires is on the rise, as is the number of Americans killed each year as the result of arson."

FRONT COVER PHOTO: This arson fire was set with a potato chip bag that burned to a small plastic container of gasoline.

PHOTO BY BLAIR DARS



Car interior after an arson fire.

PHOTO BY JOHN A. BOHN

A Sign of the Times

“Incidents of arson, like other crimes, are frequently linked to an economic downturn,” Eager continued. “The reasons are many: not only are auto thieves trying to destroy evidence, but also financially strapped people trying to get out of costly auto leases, even farmers torching expensive farm equipment in an attempt to collect on their insurance policy.”

According to Philip Reed, in a article for Edmunds.com, an automotive information Web site, titled ‘Torch My Ride: Arson for Hire,’ SUV owners who are faced with rising gas prices have found a new way to get out from under their high car payments--arson.

The loser in all this is the driving public. “You and I pay for it in our premiums,” said Robert Rowe, arson investigator for the City of Downey and a member of the task force. “Insurance premiums for everyone increase when crimes [like this] are committed.”

Bill Lundy, an Arson Investigator from Wisconsin, agrees, “The rise in vehicle arson can be expected with an increase in the cost of gasoline and the decrease in the actual cash value of less economical models.”

Investigating Vehicle Arson is Difficult

Multiple points of origin are common because of all the natural accelerants in a vehicle. The fire itself destroys potential evidence. There are several fuel sources, including gasoline, wiring, and both interior and exterior components. There are numerous ignition sources, including engine, electrical systems, and exhaust components. The significant electrical wiring system has to be completely evaluated, which is both time consuming and physically difficult. Compact structures, such as vehicles, burn quickly and completely and are extremely difficult to investigate. There are various non-intentional contributing factors, such as damage from impact, defective parts, and system failures.

Rob Painter, an Arson Investigator from Wisconsin explains, “Commonly, there is damage or misplacement of the ‘Evidence’ from the fire department. It’s not their fault, because their #1 job is to protect lives.”

Randy Callison, an Arson Investigator from Illinois believes that, “Too often, vehicle fires in very rural areas often are never investigated by the Fire Marshal or an Arson Investigator of the county resulting in fewer reported vehicle arsons.”

Insurance Companies-- Vehicle Arson’s Ally

While insurance companies are the biggest ally in fighting vehicle arson, sometimes their hands are legally tied by the terms of policies, especially in leases where arson is very prevalent.

Mike Herzberg, an Insurance Arson Investigator from Georgia, concurs, saying, “Most policies include language to the effect that ‘we will protect the interests of the loss payee (lien

holder)’ regardless of the actions of the insured.” He continues, “Therefore, if I have a vehicle fire in which the insured is ‘upside down’ (owes \$10,000 on a car valued at \$5,000) and he/she is six months in arrears on payments, my first thought would be ‘arson.’ However, I’m going to pay the value of the car to the lien holder regardless of my findings. Therefore the common ‘business decision’ is not to incur additional expenses (origin and cause investigation).”

Tim Yandell, an Arson Investigator from Oklahoma admits, “Some companies have decided it is cheaper to pay the claim and move on than have experts to do an origin and cause investigation, which will never be reported.”

Bill Lundy reminds investigators, “The International Association of Arson Investigators has a motto, ‘We are truth seekers, not case makers.’ It seems to have stood the test of time.”

Steve Harris, an Arson Investigator from Rhode Island has the same opinion saying, “Always remember to scientifically nail your ‘Origin and Cause’ first, and perform your arson investigation second. Protect yourself.”

Not Just a Problem in the United States

In the United Kingdom, the number of deliberate vehicle fires has more than tripled in the past decade and now accounts for over half the 86,000 arson fires that fire brigades attend each year in the UK. Malicious car fires cost the insurers around £77 million (US \$151,954,336) per year and result in around 20 deaths and a further 80 injuries.

Successful Practice: Winning the Battle

The Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System (MFIRS) identified motor vehicle fires and motor vehicle arson as a major problem in 1985.

Jennifer Mieth, manager of fire data and public education at the Massachusetts State Fire Marshal’s Office, said car fires are “cyclical.” In 1984, Mieth said it was “commonly accepted for Mr. and Mrs. Citizen to ‘sell’ their car back to the insurance company by lighting it on fire.” She added, “When times are good, fires are down. When they are bad they go up.”

To put a stop to that, the Burned Motor Vehicle Reporting Law, passed in 1987, required the owner of a burned motor vehicle to complete and sign a report that also must be signed by a fire official from the department in the community where the fire occurred.

This law has been effective in reducing motor vehicle fires overall and vehicle arsons in particular. Since it took effect in 1987, motor vehicle arsons have decreased 96 percent from a high of 5,116 in 1987 to 177 in 2005.



A sport utility vehicle after an arson fire.

PHOTO BY JOHN A. BOHN



Deliberate fire set at the opening of a gas tank.

PHOTO BY KELLY E. JOHNSON

The percentage of motor vehicle fires that are arsons has also dropped 80 percent in the past decade from 16.5 percent in 1993 to 4.8 percent in 2005.

For more on the Massachusetts Burned Motor Vehicle Reporting Law, download the 2005 MFIRS Annual Report from the Massachusetts Department of Fire Services Web site at <http://www.mass.gov/Eeops/docs/dfs/osfm/firedata/mfirs/2005annualreport.pdf>. Refer to pages 74-77 and 120-127.

Vehicle Arson Prevention

- Park your car in a well-lit area
- Use a secure parking lot for extended periods
- Close all windows
- Remove the key from the ignition
- Always lock doors, trunk, and tailgate
- Use antitheft devices
- Report abandoned cars to the police

If There's a Fire: What Should I Do?

- Get yourself and others out of the vehicle
- Call the fire department at 9-1-1 and tell the location of the fire
- Stay away from the vehicle--do not try to retrieve personal property
- Never put yourself in danger attempting to extinguish the fire yourself
- Do not open the hood or trunk if you expect a fire under it

2007 Arson Awareness Week

Sample Proclamation Request Letter

[Print on organizational letterhead]

[Date]

The Honorable [first and last name]

Governor of [insert state]

State Capitol

City, State, Zip

Dear Governor [insert last name]:

On behalf of the United States Fire Administration (USFA), I am contacting you for your support in proclaiming May 6-12, 2007, as “Arson Awareness Week.”

The theme of this year’s Arson Awareness Week is “Vehicle Arson: Who Pays for this Crime?”

In 2004 (most recent year for statistics), 36,000 intentionally set vehicle fires occurred, an increase of 18 percent from the previous year. Vehicle arson accounted for \$165 million in property damage, an increase of 25 percent from the previous year. Vehicle arson accounted for 29 percent of all arsons.

Arson has one of the lowest clearance rates of any major crime. The national rate for arson in 2004 was 17.1 percent. Motor vehicle clearances were lower at 7.4 percent.

Nearly 20 percent of all arsons occur in vehicles; arson is the second-highest cause of vehicle fires.

Please join with the many States that have already proclaimed this week as “Arson Awareness Week.”

If you have any further questions regarding this endeavor, please contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or Timothy Patrick O’Dowd, USFA Liaison, at Tim.ODowd@dhs.gov

Respectfully Yours,

[Your name, title and address]

2007 Arson Awareness Week Proclamation

National Arson Awareness Week 2007 Vehicle Arson: Who Pays for this Crime?

WHEREAS, In 2004 (most recent year for statistics), 36,000 intentionally set vehicle fires occurred, an increase of 18 percent from the previous year; and

WHEREAS, Arson has one of the lowest clearance rates of any major crime. The national rate for arson in 2004 was 17.1 percent. Motor vehicle clearances were lower at 7.4 percent; and

WHEREAS, Nearly 20 percent of all arsons occur in vehicles; arson is the second-highest cause of vehicle fires; and

WHEREAS, The price that America pays for vehicles fires is extreme. Arson is expensive--in pass-along costs and frequently in human life; and

WHEREAS, Public awareness is one of the specific responsibilities of the United States Fire Administration,

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT PROCLAIMED, that The International Association of Arson Investigators, Inc., Board of Directors meeting in Executive Session on February 1, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia, hereby proclaims the week, beginning on May 6, 2007, as National Arson Awareness Week, and the first full week of May shall be so designated each year thereafter.

By action of the Board of Directors
International Association of Arson Investigators, Inc.
February 1, 2007
Atlanta, Georgia

2007 Arson Awareness Week Sample Resolution

National Arson Awareness Week 2007 Vehicle Arson: Who Pays for this Crime?

WHEREAS, In 2004 (most recent year for statistics), 36,000 intentionally set vehicle fires occurred, an increase of 18 percent from the previous year; and

WHEREAS, Arson has one of the lowest clearance rates of any major crime. The national rate for arson in 2004 was 17.1 percent. Motor vehicle clearances were lower at 7.4 percent; and

WHEREAS, Nearly 20 percent of all arsons occur in vehicles; arson is the second-highest cause of vehicle fires; and

WHEREAS, The price that America pays for vehicles fires is extreme. Arson is expensive--in pass-along costs and frequently in human life; and

WHEREAS, Public awareness is one of the specific responsibilities of the United States Fire Administration,

NOW, THEREFORE, I, [Governor's or Mayor's name], [Governor or Mayor] of [City or State], on behalf of its citizens do hereby proclaim May 6-12, 2007, to be Arson Awareness Week.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the [Governor or Mayor] and [insert Cabinet or Council, etc.] pay special tribute to all fire and law enforcement investigative agencies for their dedicated and tireless service.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF, the [insert Governor or Mayor] and [insert Cabinet or Council, etc.] of the [insert City or State] have hereunto subscribed their names and have caused the Official Seal of the [insert City and County or State] to be hereunto affixed in the

[City of State] of _____ on this _____ day of
_____2007.

_____[Signature]

U.S. Fire Administration
16825 South Seton Avenue
Emmitsburg, Maryland 21727
800-561-3356
www.usfa.dhs.gov

April 2007