

# Revenge, excitement, or profit: Why do people commit arson?

May 30 2023, by Xanthe Mallett and Joel Robert McGregor

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The huge blaze that struck Randle Street in central Sydney last week is now the subject of an [arson investigation](#), authorities have confirmed.

Many details remain unclear, including the safety and whereabouts of some of the people who were [reportedly sleeping rough in the building](#), as well as the nature of any criminal charges that may arise.

Right now there's also a [fire](#) burning on a southern Great Barrier Reef island, threatening a sensitive marine site, which local rangers are [treating as suspicious](#).

While arson is yet to be confirmed in either of these specific cases, it's timely to look at the issue of arson more generally.

Aside from the personal and [environmental implications](#), the financial burden of arson is huge. Recent data are difficult to obtain, although it was estimated that the total cost of arson in Australia was [A\\$2.3 billion in 2011](#), and the annual figure is likely to have increased since then.

There's a lack of scientific research attempting to understand the arsonist, perhaps because the "typical arsonist" doesn't exist. Or maybe it's because so few arsons are solved, and the rate of successful convictions remains low.

However, the research that has been done suggests there are [six main types of arsonist](#).

## **6 types of arsonist**

Arson, as [defined](#) by the Australian Institute of Criminology, is the act of "intentionally and maliciously destroying or damaging property through the use of fire".

For a fire to be classified as arson there must be intent—the intention to cause harm or damage.

Arson can also be the primary or secondary motive—is setting the fire the main purpose, or is the fire being used to disguise another activity?

Here are the main six underlying reasons why someone might commit arson:

## 1. The 'for profit' arsonist

There are many ways someone can profit from arson. This includes extortion, or destroying a property to clear a piece of land. But most commonly these crimes are attempts at insurance fraud.

There are different types of property insurance fraud, including residential, commercial and vehicular. Residential fraud is committed by the homeowner or tenant; commercial fraud is committed by an owner to destroy company statements or claim on insurance; and vehicular fraud may occur when someone can't afford their repayments.

These are largely one-off crimes and are very focused, and the [offender](#) is easier to catch than with other types of arson because they have a direct link with the damaged property or its owner.

## 2. Pyromaniacs

These perpetrators light fires for thrills and attention. Their fires range from bins to occupied buildings, and the size and risk associated with the fires may increase over time as the arsonist needs more excitement with each event.

This type of offender is often voyeuristic, and may wait for emergency services to attend, sometimes even calling them themselves, as they want to be present at the scene. They may video or photograph the fire and the

first responders.

As a result, for investigators it's important to capture images of the crowd to see who was watching.

This category includes first responders who set fires in order to be a "hero" in attendance, seeking praise and recognition for their bravery.

For example, a New South Wales volunteer firefighter was charged in January 2021 for allegedly [starting more than 30 fires](#) during that summer.

### **3. Crime concealment**

For these offenders, the arson is secondary to the concealment of another serious [crime](#), such as murder or theft.

Fire is a very successful means of destroying many forms of evidence, such as fingerprints that may have been left at a scene or clothing worn during the crime.

### **4. The revenge arsonist**

These offenders are emotionally driven, and set fires out of anger or hatred, or for revenge for a real or perceived wrong. The need for retaliation could be based in a personal slight—such as an affair, or having been dismissed from a job.

Targets vary from individuals to institutions. And because of the emotional state of the offender, these crimes are usually disorganized and use unsophisticated methods of starting the fire, meaning they leave more evidence behind than some other types.

## 5. Extremist motivations

Extremist arsonists are driven by religious, political or social agendas.

There are two types of extremist arsonist, the first being those reacting to a civil disturbance, such as the death of a person in custody. Activities may include vandalism and looting, and the purpose may be to draw attention to a perceived injustice.

For example, 36-year-old Jose A. Felan Jr was sentenced to 6.5 years in prison in the United States after he [set fires](#) at a school and two shops, during the riots that followed the police killing of George Floyd during an arrest in May 2020.

The second type are terrorist arsonists, known as pyro-terrorism, which is [defined](#) as "the use of incendiary attacks to intimidate or coerce a government or civilian population". These offenders may use arson as one of a range of measures, and work alone or in cells.

Because their crimes are premeditated with targets selected carefully to have the most social, economic or political impact, these offenders are often highly organized, and may use advanced incendiary devices. The purpose is to cause mass fear, beyond the actual target itself.

## 6. Vandalism

Vandal arsonists are typically juveniles, who set fire to bins, abandoned vehicles or empty buildings, and may do so to cover up other crimes such as theft. Often an additional factor in the starting of the fire is peer pressure or gang initiation, as these arsonists often act in groups.

For these offenders, arson can be what criminologists call a "gateway

crime"—a crime that may lead to more severe criminal activity.

But if such offenders are given suitable support, rehabilitation can be highly successful to prevent them becoming serious, repeat offenders.

Although these are the main motives for arson, each does not act in a vacuum, and more than one may jointly contribute to the arsonist's motivations. For example, someone may be murdered out of revenge, and then the offender sets a fire to conceal that crime or destroy evidence.

Arson is highly complex crime, with a wide range of social, psychological and environmental influences. More work needs to be done to understand the arsonist and their motivations, and how they can be identified, caught, convicted and hopefully rehabilitated.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Revenge, excitement, or profit: Why do people commit arson? (2023, May 30) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-revenge-profit-people-commit-arson.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--