



FirePsych, Inc.

*Specializing in Firesetting Behavior
Assessment • Training • Research*

Uhnoo, S. (2016). **Starting a fire together: The dynamics of co-offending in juvenile arson.** *European Journal Of Criminology*, 13(3), 315-331. doi:10.1177/1477370815617189

Background Information

- It is well known that young people frequently commit crime with one or more accomplices.
- Current theories of delinquency portray delinquent groups as mere aggregates of like-minded or similarly motivated individuals
- The internal social organization of delinquent groups of juveniles in general has been found to be based on minimal division of labor, minimal coordination and unclear, shifting or absent role definitions.
- The role of peers in adolescent fire-setting has received relatively little attention despite the known importance of peer influences in adolescent antisocial behavior in general.
- The current study takes place in Sweden, where the age of criminal responsibility is 15.

Present study

- Seeks to remedy this gap [of knowledge] by examining the qualitative aspects of juvenile co-offending in general and the social organization of juvenile fire-setting in particular.
- Aims to categorize the ways division of labor is managed among juveniles engaged in planning, preparing, and committing joint illegal fire-setting.

Method

- All court cases involving individuals aged under 21 and convicted of arson or gross arson in Sweden in 1992-2008 were identified.
- 60 cases from this population were selected based on the availability of suitable and sufficient materials on them.
- 11% of all individuals were women.
- Only 6 cases contained individuals who were 17 or older, and approximately 20% had recently reached the age of criminal responsibility (15 years old).
- The cases were selected with the purpose of conducting qualitative analyses in the interests of a deeper understanding of the social organization of juvenile delinquency, and to thereby contribute to the construction of useful analytic frames.

Measures

- The collected legal descriptions (court judgments, police interrogations, and witness statements, and explicit motives for fire-setting) were analyzed using a coding approach inspired by grounded theory, and focused on types of actions, interactions, motives, moral attitudes and relationships between the juveniles in the group, as well as their physical location and degree of involvement.
- The ‘Social organization’ at the heart of this analysis refers to the patterns of relationships between various roles performed.

- 'Role' is defined as a set of expectations and behaviors on how to act and not act as a certain type of actor in a specific setting.
- 'Position' is defined as a dynamic and flexible function undertaken at different stages of the fire-setting event.

Results

- Nine distinct positions were identified as actualized among the sample during the co-offending process.
 - **The Motivator**- supplies the motive or incentive to act
 - **The Strategist**- supplies an idea on how to proceed from motive to action
 - **The Skills Person**- supplies fire-setting skills, know-how or experience.
 - **The Informed**- supplies information about criminal opportunities.
 - **The Resource-Keeper**- supplies material resources, e.g. flammable liquids, incendiaries, fire-making materials, cigarette lighter or money.
 - **The Driver**- drives, by moped or car, the offenders and the materials to and from the scene.
 - **The Lookout**- keeps guard to decrease the risk of getting caught.
 - **The Fire-Setter**- directly contributes to the setting of the fire by, e.g. smashing windows, arranging the fire-making materials, pouring out flammable liquid, setting fire with matches or a lighter, throwing incendiary bombs.
 - **The Audience**- present at the scene, observing, but not actively or directly contributing to, the execution of the crime.
- The fire-setting analysis varied in number of offenders, motive, degree of complexity, and the positions taken by the youths involved; not all of the nine positions were actualized in each of the examined cases.
- The youth could act in more than one position simultaneously, or several people could jointly occupy the same position.
- This study has shown juvenile fire-setting in a group setting to be more ambiguous, complex, and heterogeneous a phenomenon than earlier assumptions about juvenile fire-setting as a group activity would lead us to believe.

Abstract completed by Alaina Millard