

Understand, Manage & Reduce the Risks of Arson: Protect Your School



In Vancouver, police investigators confirm that a fire at a Sikh school was deliberately set...in Edmonton an arson fire destroys a portable classroom at an elementary school...arson is suspected in a school fire in Richmond Hill, Ontario...fire in a school library in Victoria follows a break-and-enter...police suspect arson in a fire at a First Nations school in northern Manitoba...arson is responsible for a church school fire in Neguac, N.B.¹

Each year, schools across Canada are impacted by deliberately set fires.

In fact, arson is the most destructive and potentially dangerous type of property crime. When it occurs at a school, the results can be particularly devastating. A school fire is frightening, disruptive and potentially life threatening. If students are present, it can cause severe emotional trauma. And, it can result in significant property damage causing the school to close its doors temporarily...or for a very long time. In turn, this may result in an interruption to or, in the worst case scenario, a complete suspension of services.

Why are schools vulnerable to arson?

Schools are considered to be 'soft targets' by thieves

Many schools do not have sophisticated security systems or patrols in place. For this reason and because schools are often empty during holidays, midterms, summer breaks, etc., they are viewed as 'soft targets' by petty thieves and drug addicts. Looking for items that can be readily converted to cash, they steal computers, musical instruments, sports equipment, etc. and set fires to cover their tracks.

Schools may be targets for hate crimes

Schools that serve the language, religious or cultural needs of a particular segment of the population are ideal targets for individuals looking to send politically or racially motivated hate messages. These messages are 'delivered' through a variety of crimes, ranging from graffiti to malicious vandalism to destruction of property by arson. They are calculated to be picked up in the media and viewed by sympathizers.

Schools often attract juvenile fire-setters

Juveniles who set school fires often have some connection to the school. They may be current or former students, siblings or friends of students. They may be youth who live in the neighbourhood or who use school grounds as a place to gather after hours. Winnipeg Police Services² has outlined various profiles of young arsonists. They fall into three broad categories: the curious fire-setter, the problem fire-setter, and the delinquent fire-setter.

In 2008, there were 13,270 cases of arson reported in Canada. Of the offenders charged, 1,067 were juveniles.

**[www.statcan.gc.ca/
daily-quotidien/080717/
t080717b-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080717/t080717b-eng.htm)**

Retrieved April 22, 2010

Some of the behavioural risk indicators that teachers, coaches, staff and volunteers need to be aware of include students who:

- Generally have poor relationships with other children
- Have problems at school with the course load or with a particular teacher or fellow student
- Have undergone a noticeable personality change
- Have a history of bullying³
- Have experienced, or are experiencing, a change or crisis in their lives—for example, death or a divorce

While in and of themselves these issues do not indicate or portend delinquency, they do call for extra vigilance when other risk factors are present.

According to the US Fire Administration, 47% percent of all middle and high school structure fires and 25% of all elementary school structure fires are incendiary or suspicious in origin.

US Fire Administration
www.usfa.dhs.gov/statistics/reports/pubs/tfrs.shtm

Retrieved April 23, 2010

Telltale signs that your school may be at risk

An arson fire is rarely an isolated incident. Often the fire itself is the last component in a prolonged escalation process, or a pattern of destructive behaviour. There are usually clear warning signs that a school might be at risk. The following are important risk indicators:

- Empty beer/liquor bottles, cigarette packages left on school grounds
- Groups of youths loiter near the building on a regular basis, especially between the hours of 9:00 and 11:00 PM.
- There have been graffiti or acts of petty vandalism.
- Small fires and/or break-ins have been reported during the past two years.
- Threatening letters, telephone calls, or emails have been received.
- There have been fires and/or break-ins at other schools in the area in recent months.
- Evidence of fire-setting has been found on the premises—for example, spent matches, scorched debris, etc.

Create an arson education & prevention program

Schools need to take a thoughtful, systematic and proactive approach to arson prevention. A clearly articulated Arson Education and Prevention Program that identifies the risks and establishes procedures to control them can help prevent a potentially disastrous incident. The Program should be overseen by a qualified individual or committee and reviewed annually, in conjunction with a formal risk assessment of the premises.

The following 10-step program includes key guidelines for arson prevention.

1. Act Quickly to Protect your School

- Contact the police immediately if your school has been vandalized or threatened. Your local police department will investigate and may also increase their surveillance of the area.
- Contact your insurer as soon as possible. No matter how minor, losses should always be reported. Your insurer can be a valuable source of risk management advice. Risk specialists may detect a pattern or potential threat that is not readily apparent.
- If your school has been vandalized, you should repair the damage as quickly as you can. Damage that hasn't been repaired makes a school look neglected and can act as an open invitation for further vandalism and more serious crimes.

2. Community & Educate

- Communicate the physical, social and economic consequences of youth fire-setting to teachers, coaches, administrative staff, caretakers and volunteers.
- Integrate fire safety into the curriculum, for students of all ages.
- Enlist the help of local police and fire departments.
- Introduce arson prevention to parents—provide material about common warning signs, steps to take and educational approaches.

3. Restrict Access & Entry

- Manage access to your premises: do not store keys to any school building, portable, sports facility or outbuilding in a visible and/or easily accessible location.
- Lock all entry points at night and when there are no scheduled activities: doors, windows, exterior gates, etc.
- Inspect locks frequently to ensure that they are in good working order.
- Install bars or mesh screens over low level windows.
- Protect roof vents and skylights with grills, bars or other secure barriers.

4. Implement Security Measures

- Install intrusion, smoke and fire alarms that are monitored by a central station.
- Consider installing CCTV cameras in visible areas and/or hiring a security firm to patrol your premises.
- Keep school premises well lit, for example: install perimeter flood-lights on the exterior, motion-activated lighting near doors and windows, and point lighting to illuminate recesses and alcoves.
- Use timers to activate interior lights at different times.
- Post signage indicating that the premises are under surveillance.
- Participate in a Neighbourhood Watch Program.
- Launch a School Watch Program.

5. Report Any Suspicious Activity

- Report anything unusual to the police, e.g.:
 - Groups of youth loitering on school property after hours or late at night
 - Evidence of fire-setting (small garbage fires, spent matches, etc.) or graffiti
 - Incidents of small fires in the neighbourhood
 - Threatening letters or phone calls
 - Incidents of petty theft—in the classroom, locker room, cafeteria, school office, etc.

6. Take Preventative Landscaping Measures

- Define property boundaries by installing perimeter fencing.
- Install barriers to block narrow spaces between structures and underneath portables.
- Trim bushes and shrubs near doors and windows to eliminate hiding places.
- Plant thorny bushes under windows.
- Cut back grass and other vegetation to a minimum of 5 meters from the edges of buildings.

When a school is damaged by fire, the effects are wider reaching than the damage to the building. Arson results in distress to students and staff along with disrupted and lost class time affecting learning, exams, and educational advancement. Teachers lose valuable teaching tools and resources that they have built up over their careers. Schools are the heart of a local community and it is crucial to make sure they are safe.

**US Fire Administration May 2010
Fire Awareness Week Media Kit**

www.usfa.dhs.gov/downloads/pdf/arson/aaw10_media_kit.pdf

Retrieved April 24 2010

In 30 seconds, a simple fire can be totally out of control.

Winnipeg Police Services

www.winnipeg.ca/police/takeaction/arson_prev.stm

Retrieved April 20, 2010

7. Develop a “Best Practices” Housekeeping Program

- Keep premises free of litter.
- Do not leave ladders or other building tools in the open, anywhere on school premises.
- Lock maintenance buildings at all times.
- Keep limited quantities of fuels and flammable solvents and make sure that they are securely stored.
- Dispose of old newspapers, magazines, unused books, boxes and other paper products.
- Keep garbage and recycling bins away from buildings.

8. Minimize the Impact of a Fire

- Ensure that telephones are easily accessible for 911 emergency calls; post emergency numbers and procedures in several clearly visible locations.
- Install portable fire extinguishing equipment and hold regular training sessions.
- If you have a fire sprinkler system, ensure that it is regularly serviced and tested.
- If your building is divided into separate fire breaks, ensure that all fire doors are securely closed when the building is unoccupied.
- Use flame retardant products and materials whenever possible.
- Maintain an inventory database that includes photographs and serial numbers for all valuable property.

9. Put Safety First

- Contact your local Fire Department for comprehensive Evacuation and Fire Safety Protocols.
- Inspect emergency exit lighting regularly.
- Post evacuation plans on doors throughout your premises.
- Ensure that faculty, students and staff are familiar with emergency procedures.
- Hold regular fire drills.
- Do not re-enter a burning building.
- Never pursue suspect individuals or vehicles.

About one in every four fires is intentionally set. Almost half of these fires were set by youths under the age of 18

“Fire and Youth.” Focus Adolescent Services. Feb. 2009

Focus Adolescent Services.
focusas.com/firesetting

Retrieved April 28, 2010

10. Prepare for the Worst

- Develop a comprehensive Business Continuity Plan that:
 - Includes emergency readiness and response procedures
 - Includes protocols to reduce the risks of personal injury and damage to your property
 - Enables your school to continue to provide academic services and programs in temporary premises
 - Allows you to restore your premises with minimal interruption and as cost-efficiently as possible
 - Enable you to retain key staff and volunteers who may have to move on if normal operations cease for an extended period
 - Preserves your reputation and good standing among all stakeholders and the community

Conclusion

Every year, fires occur at Canadian schools—some minor, others far more serious. Personal injury is of paramount concern. Next is damage to the property and the amount of time required to repair and restore school premises. In the event of an extended period, this can be extremely disruptive to the students' academic performance—especially for those taking part in standardized national exams or applying to post-secondary programs. A prolonged school closure may force students to relocate and would certainly jeopardize new enrolment. That's why it's so important to take a proactive approach to arson prevention. In so doing, you can help ensure that your school does not become a target...that it can continue to be a safe place for students, teachers and community members.

At Ecclesiastical Insurance, we hope that your school is never touched by fire of any kind. If it should happen, however, we are ready to help every step of the way.

Popular video sharing website... show numerous instances of teenagers using body spray to create human torches...Parents need to know that some youth use aerosol body sprays and other seemingly benign products in very dangerous ways and that they should be vigilant for signs that their child may be involved in such behaviour.

The Ontario Fire Service Messenger February/March 2008

www.ofm.gov.on.ca/english/Publications/Messenger/2008/pdf/FebMar08.pdf

Retrieved April 28, 2010

References

¹ [www.cbc.ca - http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/07/31/bc-sikh-school-arson-confirmed.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/07/31/bc-sikh-school-arson-confirmed.html)

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Retrieved April 22, 2010

² "Take Action Schools: Arson Prevention" Winnipeg Police Services

³ "The Interaction between Juvenile School Fire Setting and Bullying: An Exploratory Study". This 2009 Phoenix, Arizona study completed by Amy Sharp, Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, and Janet Boberg explores the interaction between school firesetting and bullying (School Social Work Journal, Vol. 33, No.2 pgs. 86-97).

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