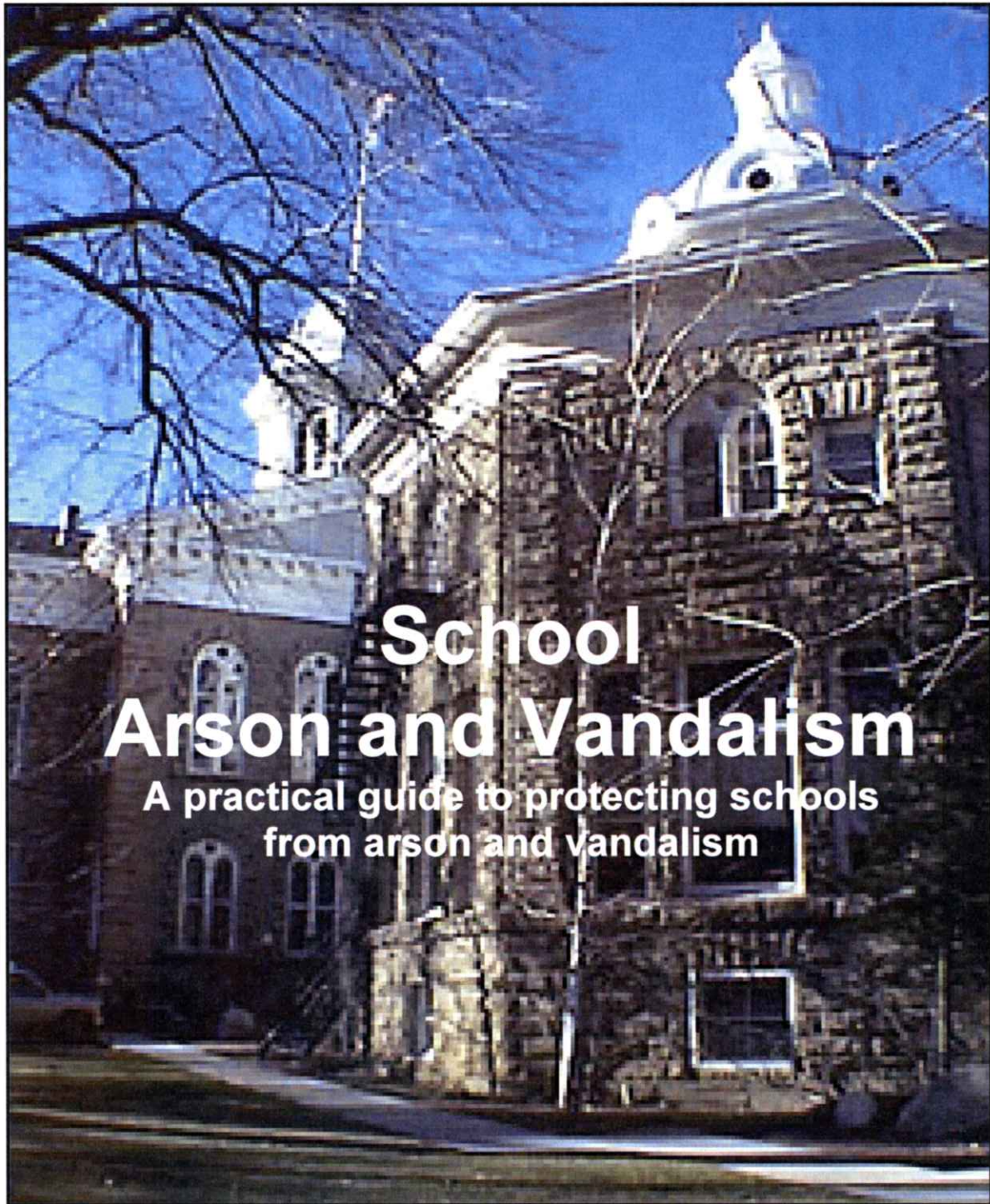


Willis



School Arson and Vandalism

**A practical guide to protecting schools
from arson and vandalism**

Schools Arson: The Facts

On December 2004 the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued a special report that explores the causes and characteristics of school fires. The report, developed by the National Fire Data Center under FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration, is part of the Topical Fire Research Series and is based on 2002 data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). A copy of the full report can be downloaded from: <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/statistics/reports/pubs/tfrs.shtm>.

According to the U.S. Fire Administration/National Fire Data Center 2004 report:

There were approximately 6,000 school structure fires in the United States during 2002. The leading cause of school structure fires on average is incendiary/suspicious activity, which includes arson fires, and accounts for 37% of all school structure fires and 52% of middle and high school structure fires.

The peak month for school fires in 2002 was July, driven by a sharp increase in fires at elementary schools. It may be that elementary schools were more attractive targets for incendiary or suspicious fires during the summer when few school staff are on site. Elementary, middle, and high schools had above average fire incidence in the spring and fall—typically the end and beginning of the academic year. Fire incidence was at its lowest between November and February, in the middle of the academic year.

Seventy-eight percent of school fires occur during the school week and 22% on weekends. Fifty-five percent of fires occur between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., the hours students are most likely to be in school. Thirty percent of fires occur between 5 p.m. and midnight; 15% occur between midnight and 8 a.m. This pattern is consistent for all of the major cause categories.

Bathrooms are where the highest percentage of school fires originate, typically in bathroom trash cans, which contributes to the predominance of incendiary or suspicious fires. Older students smoking in bathrooms may also increase the risk of such fires. These areas present children with a place to set a fire without having to contend with constant adult supervision. Kitchens are the second leading area of origin for structure fires, reflecting cooking fires, and outdoor areas are the second leading area of origin for all school fires, which include fires set in outdoor dumpsters and fields.

Arson Prevention

1. Maintain

- Are legible fire exit and route signs in appropriate locations?
- Is there a Fire Safety Plan and is the teacher aware of the content and location of the Plan?
- Where there is an EXIT door is there a clear path through the classroom furniture?
As a rule of thumb, the width of the clear path should be the same as the width of the door(s).
- Are ceilings or exit doors free of combustible material such as artwork, posters, paper, etc?
- As a guideline, no more than 20% of the total wall surface (include boards, cupboards, windows, etc.) to be covered with combustible materials.
- Ensure that doors and windows are in good repair and that locks are working. To stop lighted paper from being pushed under doors gaps under doors to the street should be as narrow as possible.
- To contain any fires from lighted rags or paper, letterboxes should have a metal container fitted on the inside.
- Keep leaves, firewood, overgrown brush, shrubbery and other combustibles away from buildings. Trim or remove shrubbery and signs that obstruct the view of the building from the street.
- Be sure there are no combustible items stored near the outside of your school.
- As part of staff training remind all employees of the arson threat and ask them to report any suspicious behavior.

2. Secure

- Identify possible entry routes for intruders i.e., via yards, up drainpipes, on to flat roofs. What can be done to prevent such access?
- Special danger areas are storage and waste bins. There has to be a rule that access is only available to authorized members of staff. Is there a system – or should there be – for leaving lights on at night?
- Keep all matches and lighters out of the reach of children.
- Illuminate school building exteriors and entrances. Motion activated lighting is effective and inexpensive.
- Install burglar and fire alarm systems. Alarm devices can be inexpensively wired through the telephone circuits to transmit an alarm to the police and or the fire department.
- Reduce the number of keyed locks and keep a record of who has a key.
- Secure your vehicles.
- Consider fencing the property. Woven wire fences with locked gates limit access without providing privacy for the arsonist.

- Be wary of strangers. Encourage friends and neighbors to document any suspicious activities noting date time and a description of vehicles to stand watch or irregular patrols can be very effective.

3. Publicize

- Make a media event of your efforts. Arsonists seldom strike facilities that are ready for them.
- Report suspicious activity near school to the local police and support Neighborhood Watch programs.

The most common materials ignited in school structure fires are paper, plastic, wood, and fabric. These materials reflect the high incidence of both incendiary and trash fires, are consistent with the materials commonly used by juvenile fire setters, and are common materials in and around schools.

School Vandalism

Schools suffer a disproportionate rate of vandalism because vandals have easy access to them out of school hours, at weekends and during vacation periods. Schools pay out millions of dollars each year to clean up graffiti, repair buildings, or replace vandalized equipment. That means less money for new books, computers, sports equipment, and student activities.

Why Are Schools Susceptible To Vandalism?

- Are usually unattended outside school hours.
- Have rolling landscape and concealing shrubbery.
- Are often unsupervised.
- Have little lighting that is also usually ineffective.
- Offer open access to grounds, (basketball, football, soccer, skate boarding).
- Are seen by many as not owned by anyone in particular.
- Have many hidden alcoves and entrances.
- Provide convenient unsupervised gathering places, (drinking parties, etc.).
- Have public thoroughfares through the site.
- Have refuse containers which are often set on fire.
- Have a lack of deterrent/warning signs.
- Have multiple entrances to the site.
- Are seen as representing the "establishment" and as such seen as suitable targets to express anger/frustrations/jealousy.
- Are shielded from natural surveillance, (oversight by passer's by, neighbors, other interested parties).
- Have few overlooking neighboring houses and roads.
- Have objects that can be thrown (rocks) and other debris lying around.
- Are often targets for protestors (for graffiti).

Vandalism: Who and Why?

Most vandals are young people from grade school children to teens to young adults who damage property for one or more of the following reasons:

- Boredom
- Anger
- Revenge
- Defiance
- Alliance

Vandalism often results from opportunist damage that has resulted from people using the environment and adapting it to make it function better for the. (for example skateboarders, roller-bladders, or BMX bike riders making ramps). The offender may have had no intention of causing the damage, nor do they perceive it as damage, but

others see the results as vandalism. Examples of this are: short cuts across lawns, broken windows near ball playing areas, holes in fences to create short cuts. Effective and well thought out environmental design strategies can often lead to a reduction in what is seen by most as vandalism.

Vandalism Factors: Considerations?

Many factors contribute to the likelihood of vandalism. The first step in trying to manage vandalism is to understand the problem and why it happens. It is important when trying to combat vandalism to consider:

- What areas are vulnerable?
- Do people loiter there?
- Do people play formal or informal games there?
- Is it a legitimate play area?
- What makes the area vulnerable?
- Are there seats or resting places?
- Do you find empty bottles, cigarette butts or syringes?
- Can anyone outside see what happens in the area?
- Is there adequate lighting?
- Is fencing appropriate and effective?
- Does landscaping allow people to conceal themselves?
- Is there anything that can be used as a missile (e.g. rocks, trash cans, debris, etc.)?
- Is the area used as an access-way or a thoroughfare?
- What can be done to change the use of the area from illegitimate use to legitimate use?

There may be other factors specific to your site. Try to identify when vandalism occurs. Consider the time of day, week and month, etc.

Minimizing Opportunities for Vandalism

An empty campus can be a temptation for both mischievous kids and adults. The warm summer months allow for late outside activities and often the neighborhood children are finding themselves on school campuses looking for something to do. What can you do to protect your campus from vandalism?

- Check to be sure your fire and intrusion alarms are working properly. Repair all elements that are malfunctioning.
- Check lighting on campus. Replace all burned out bulbs. Install lighting in currently dark areas and areas at risk. Consider installing motion sensor lights.
- Add or increase nightly patrols of campus, especially around the 4th of July when fireworks are plentiful.

- Cut back weeds and other vegetation around the campus to reduce fire risk and hiding places.
- Shut down the gas supply to science rooms when school is out of session.
- Remove garbage cans when school is out of session. Garbage has been used as an ignition source for arson fires.
- Check fences and gates for damage. Make repairs and keep gates locked.
- Keep window coverings closed to hide room contents.
- Store high value equipment (computers, TVs etc.) in secure rooms, preferably without windows.
- Clean up vandalism as soon as it happens—replace signs, repair playground equipment, paint over graffiti.
- Remove rocks and debris.
- Clean up and remove flammable materials such as leaves and garden cuttings.
- Install security cages on external lights and speakers.
- Erect clear and unambiguous warning signs about trespass and potential prosecution.
- Replace windows with damage resistant material such as polycarbonates.
- Direct foot traffic where you want it to go with fencing such as pool fencing.
- Remove canvases for graffiti by planting shrubs in front of walls.
- Consider closed circuit television systems.

Other Resources: Students and Community

- Educate the public, especially young people, about the costs of vandalism.
- Tap into the energy and idealism of youth. Involve young people in all vandalism prevention efforts.
- Involve students in beautification programs, named gardens, murals, mosaics
- Support recreational programs for young people in your community.
- Organize a graffiti clean-up project in your school.
- Involve the community along with students to paint murals on areas that are vulnerable to graffiti. Make it a contest for teens.
- Inform members of the local community about vandalism problems affecting the school. Discuss its victims, costs, and solutions.
- Use natural surveillance, involve neighbors, school communities, community groups to report anyone they see committing vandalism to the police, school authorities, or someone who can take action.
- Develop a close relationship with local police.
- Ask police or a city agency to start a hotline for reporting vandalism.

Look for ways to use the talent and creativity of vandals in positive, nondestructive activities. Sponsor a mural contest at your school or a youth center. Encourage art supply stores and area businesses to provide large canvases and materials for kids to create murals inspired by themes like

saying no to drugs, the importance of education, or celebrating diversity in your community. Ask local artists to attend and provide instruction and advice or judge a mural contest.

Start a vandalism hotline in cooperation with law enforcement and school officials that let callers anonymously report incidents of vandalism and gives tips about vandals.

The cost of vandalism represents a significant drain on school communities, but if schools tackle the problem with careful preparation and planned management strategies the problem can be reduced.