

Humans light 85 percent of bushfires, and we do virtually nothing to stop it

November 18 2019, by Janet Stanley



Credit: Junior Libby/public domain

It's hard to comprehend why someone would deliberately light a bushfire. Yet this behavior regularly occurs in Australia and other countries. We would go a long way to preventing bushfires if we better understood this troubling phenomenon.

[Experts estimate](#) about [85% of bushfires](#) are [caused by humans](#). A person may accidentally or carelessly start a fire, such as leaving a campfire unattended or using machinery which creates sparks. Or a person could maliciously light a fire.

This criminal behavior is [not widely recognized or understood](#) by the public, fire authorities or researchers. This means opportunities to prevent bushfires are generally being missed and resources devoted to tackling the cause are far from commensurate with the devastating consequences.

Profile of an arsonist

[Research has shown](#) about 8% of officially recorded vegetation fires were attributed to malicious lighting, and another 22% as suspicious. However, about 40% of officially recorded vegetation fires did not have an assigned cause. When unassigned bushfires were investigated by fire investigators, the [majority were found](#) to be maliciously lit.

But official fires are just the tip of the iceberg: the actual number of bushfires in Australia is thought to be [about five times](#) that recorded. Virtually none of these unrecorded fires are investigated.

Young men comprise the largest group of people who maliciously light fires. [These youth are usually troubled](#), likely to have absent fathers and little home supervision. They are likely to have experienced child abuse and neglect and associated with an antisocial peer group. Lighting fires [may give a feeling of excitement](#), defiance and power, or it may be an expression of displaced anger. Some offenders have an intellectual disability.

Offenders may make no attempt to extinguish the fire, and give little consideration to the consequences. Some may have no feelings of

remorse or fear of punishment. Others may never have intended to create such wide devastation.

[Older males](#) who light malicious fires also have a history of social and educational disadvantage, poor family functioning in childhood, [low self-esteem](#), and often a pathological interest in fire. However the older the person gets, the less likely they are to light fires.

So why don't we talk about arson?

During last week's east-coast [bushfire](#) crisis, a handful of news reports covered people lighting fires. They include [a teenager who allegedly lit a Queensland bushfire](#) that razed 14 homes, and [a man charged with starting a Sydney fire by letting off fireworks](#).

Media attention on a fire's cause is generally scant and the public rarely hears much beyond initial charges being laid. This is in stark contrast to blanket news coverage of the consequences of bushfires.

A staggeringly low apprehension and conviction rate for offenders - [less than 1%](#) - is a further barrier to public awareness of the problem. Conviction [rarely](#) leads to a substantial punishment.

Fire brigades in most states offer a limited education course for some children who light fires, usually led by volunteers. But there are few targeted treatment programs for those who light bushfires.

Rethinking the bushfire problem

Rather than tackling the cause of the problem, the major response to bushfire in Australia is mitigation. This largely involves one blunt approach: hazard reduction burns to reduce bushfire fuel loads. This is

an increasingly difficult task as [climate change](#) makes weather conditions more unsuitable for controlled burns.

This business-as-usual approach has [not halted the upward trajectory](#) of bushfire ignitions.

A much greater focus on prevention would require a significant rethinking of the bushfire problem. This would include collaboration between government, business, non-government organizations, communities and others.

Victoria's Gippsland Arson Prevention Program provides a promising model. Through public education, media engagement and other means, it informs communities on how to help prevent arson. The committee includes Victoria Police, government and fire authorities and local power generators.

In one example of an on-the-ground response, local authorities organized the removal of dumped cars, which are commonly seen by bored and troubled youth as an invitation to start a fire.

Arson prevention also includes addressing long-term problems such as youth disadvantage and unemployment, especially in rural-urban fringe areas where [most human-lit fires occur](#).

[Shorter-term approaches](#) include providing support and treatment to at-risk youth, and situational crime prevention such as good lighting and cameras in places vulnerable to [fire](#) lighting.

We must open up a society-wide discussion of bushfire prevention, which includes listening to local communities about what they value and what can be done about the problem. As climate change worsens—and bushfires along with it—a radical rethink is required.

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