

# Sharp rise in arson attacks on British schools

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Last month, four ex-students from Maltby Comprehensive School were imprisoned for a total of 24 years after setting fire to their school in the former mining village in South Yorkshire. They were all just 15 years old when they set fire to the school's library in December 1998. Their role in the incident came to light after they bragged about what they had done.

From the sentences meted out to these young people it is clear that the judge has sought to use them as an example to others. In sentencing, Judge Patrick Robertshaw said that school burnings were prevalent and needed to be deterred: "Schools are a focus of resentment and are often a soft target because they generally lack sophisticated surveillance and security, and it is often possible for a fire to take hold with the risk of serious destruction before any effective alarm can be raised. Any young person thinking about school burning should realise that if caught it is inevitable that a very substantial custodial sentence will follow."

The court never bothered to pose the question as to why so many young people take the drastic step of committing arson, let alone why they so frequently target schools. Instead, Robertson railed against the "calculated, pre-planned wickedness" of the boys. On average, three schools a day are set on fire in Britain, with only 15 percent of these believed to be accidental. Schools are at a higher risk of arson than any other occupied buildings; only sheds and barns fare worse.

According to the Arson Prevention Bureau (APB), malicious school fires peak in May and July, during school holidays and at weekends. The worst time is between 6 and 10 p.m. Figures released by insurer Zurich Municipal show that the average annual cost of arson on schools is £43 million over the last 10 years—but reached £45 million in the first five months of 2000 alone.

Many of those who carry out attacks on schools are teenagers whose family life has broken down and who

live in disadvantaged inner-city areas. Often the perpetrators are high on drugs or drink.

Only 10 percent of arsonists are caught, and of these just 2 percent receive a caution or are convicted of a criminal offence. Of those convicted, 47 percent are aged 15-19, while 65 percent of those cautioned are aged 10-14.

Psychologist Andrew Muckley is one of the few people to carry out research into young fire-starters. He opposes punishment as a solution. Muckley points out that, unlike burglary or car theft where repeat offences take place, he has never met anyone who has committed arson more than once. According to Muckley, few offenders are pyromaniacs, most merely use the activity as a way to express their anger or gain attention.

"Many fire setters don't do well at school and can't communicate well," said Muckley. "Their communications tend to be non-verbal and they act out their feelings. There's always one teacher they get really angry about—most of us get really cross with one teacher, but we can handle it. These people can't. The teacher punishes them; now they are going to punish the teacher. They don't plan to burn the school down; it's quite likely that they haven't thought about the consequences at all. The fire dissipates their anger. Locking people up doesn't help; reward is more effective than punishment. There are answers—you have to re-educate adults."

Michael Haggett, who works with pathological fire setters at Rampton Hospital, has echoed Muckley's analysis explaining: "Most kids have a fascination with fire—matches, magnifying glasses, whatever. They find it exciting to mess around per se." He points out that there are those for whom fire becomes more than a fascination, it becomes a voice. "The fire is an end product. It's the symptom of their problems. Targeted against property can be a cry for help, a communication

of distress.”

To understand this phenomenon it is necessary to go beyond individual psychology and examine the deteriorating social conditions under which thousands of young people and children are now living. The two most recent cases of arson attacks on schools that have been highlighted both occurred in former mining villages where unemployment can be as high as 50 percent, with all the attendant social problems and feelings of despair.

There also remains a question as to why schools are such a popular target. Surely this points to a growing number of young people who feel alienated from school life. Young people face an increased pressure to both perform and conform, but increasingly can only look forward to fewer life prospects and opportunities for self-development and expression.

As the curriculum within schools becomes more prescriptive, there is little scope to adapt it to the needs of an increasing number of children who are disaffected with the education on offer. From teachers to students, all are expected to meet a set of increasingly stringent academic and behavioural standards and targets. Both teachers and taught are subject to constant monitoring, testing and examination, all published in the requisite “league tables”. The school environment is becoming less and less about education and more about control.

Is it little wonder that greater numbers of children are becoming hostile to these establishments? A recent Audit Commission report notes that each year one million of the eight million school children in England will be absent without authorisation. Additionally, some 12,000 children are permanently excluded from school and 150,000 are temporarily excluded. These figures do not include those who turn up at school to be registered and then walk out, or those who have been surreptitiously pushed out of schools by head teachers desperate to keep their exclusion figures down.

Today, 30 percent of children in Britain live in poverty and one in five suffer some kind of mental health problem. Those affected are four times more likely to truant. They are also three times more likely to have specific learning difficulties, three times more likely to have special educational needs and ten times more likely to be in trouble with the police.

The vast majority of children with mental health problems live in conditions where their families are

unable to cope. With cuts in social services spending, only the most extreme cases (i.e., those which involve abuse, disability or being taken into local authority care) receive help. Charities such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Young Carers are increasingly involved in the pastoral, psychological and therapeutic care of children and young people.

In the past, social services departments had greater resources to try and prevent family breakdowns, and specialist schools able to assist children with emotional and behavioural difficulties were more numerous. Current practice now keeps far more of them in mainstream schools, which are largely unable to deal with the range of difficulties such children experience. This goes some way towards explaining why some young people feel they can only express their frustration and anger by damaging the institution they feel is causing them the most unhappiness. The punitive approach now being taken by Britain's legal system can only exacerbate the problem.



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