

Britain: Sharp rise in arson attacks on schools

Symptom of widespread youth poverty and alienation

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A dramatic rise in arson attacks means that an average of 20 schools each week are being damaged or destroyed across Britain.

According to the governmental Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 75 percent of all reported school fires are now believed to be the results of arson. Statistically, 1 in 15 schools will suffer a fire.

The largest national school insurer, Zurich Municipal, has stated that the annual number of large school fires, causing more than £100,000 damage, has risen by 55 percent. Last year saw an increase in the number of more costly school fires—with 42 incidents causing damage costing more than £5 million to repair, an increase from 27 reported incidents the previous year. The average annual cost of school arson was £43 million over the 10 years between 1990 and 2000, but this reached £45 million in the first five months of 2000 alone. During 2002, deliberately started school fires cost an estimated £96.6 million. These figures account only for reported fires—those not reported are also believed to be on the increase.

There are other costs which are much more difficult to quantify, such as the disruption to students preparing for exams, the destruction of pupil records and the loss of school work.

The Arson Prevention Bureau (APB), backed by the insurance industry, says that arson of all kinds is a growing problem—with fire-setting incidents having doubled since the early 1990s. According to APB, malicious school fires peak in May and July, during school holidays and at weekends. Although traditionally arson attacks have been concentrated out of hours—consequently injuries from such incidents have been relatively low—an increasing number of incidents are occurring during the school day. During 2001, the county of West Yorkshire recorded 33 deliberate school fires which were started while pupils were still in class.

The conventional age of the average “fire-starter” is also shifting. Previous research into the profile of a typical school arsonist found that a large majority of fires were started by youngsters aged between seven and seventeen years old. But about a quarter of fires are now believed to have been started by children who are aged seven and younger.

Speaking on the recent increase in arson during school hours, the APB’s chief executive, Jane Milne, said, “The rise in daytime arson attacks on schools is very alarming and poses a very real and increasing risk to the safety of pupils. And in addition to safety, these attacks can cause severe disruption to pupils’ education, impacting on the morale of the school and its pupils for many years.”

When asked about the possible causes of the rise in school arson, Milne offered no explanation. And in general this pattern is repeated, with arson usually addressed as solely a criminal problem.

In 2001, for example, Merseyside Police began using helicopters in an attempt to cut down on school fires during the summer holiday.

They patrolled schools which were thought to be particularly at risk of attack, using cameras and searchlights.

The central fact is that the rise in deliberately set fires to school buildings during the last decade or so has been accompanied by an ongoing crisis in education that has exacerbated the wholesale disaffection of millions of school pupils produced by growing social problems throughout society.

On coming into office in 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s New Labour government said that its three priorities would be “Education, Education and Education.”

Instead, in the space of just seven years, the government has taken an already depressed and underfunded education system and created the most heavily proscribed curricula in living memory, demoralised large sections of the teaching profession, turned millions of school pupils away from learning and towards an endless series of rote learning for exams, and imbued the whole ethos of state education with a spirit of selection and elitism that leaves the majority in a state of stress and desperation whether they succeed or fail.

From the young school-starters, aged just four years old to school-leavers of 16 to 18 years of age, no pupil has escaped the government’s attempts to measure attainment through exam results.

As teachers have been increasingly turned into academic testers, pupils have become more and more disaffected by the narrow scope and results of their studies. Even according to the government’s own review of secondary school education, millions of school pupils across Britain are being put under intolerable pressure because of the constant stream of exams.

Consequently increased numbers of school pupils are more likely to truant. According to the Youth Justice Board, one in five pupils admits to having truanting for at least one whole day and in some areas of the country almost half of all pupils are absent without permission at one time or another each year. On any given day, there are around 50,000 absentees. In addition to this, a growing number of children are being officially excluded from school.

Alongside the evident alienation from school life a discernible radicalisation is also taking place, particularly amongst older pupils as they become more involved in political issues outside of the classroom. An important experience for many school children has been the US-led invasion of Iraq. As antiwar sentiment swept the classrooms, many thousands of school children left their schools to demonstrate—in open defiance of school authorities. In some cities the police set up patrols outside schools to stop pupils walking out to join demonstrations, confirming in the eyes of many that their schools have become little more than holding pens.

Evidence suggests that the greatest long-term damage being wrought by the government’s blinkered approach to education is being

suffered by the very young, threatening to create alienation on a generational level toward school education.

Children as young as four are losing out on play as even reception school classes (for four- and five-year olds) are being forced to concentrate on national tests in English and mathematics under pressure to perform well in league tables. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) general secretary, Dr. Mary Bousted, said that teachers were increasingly “teaching to the test,” which means youngsters are being denied the broad and balanced curriculum to which they were entitled. Bousted made the warning as the ATL, an extremely “moderate” union, threatened non-cooperation in the production of primary and secondary school league tables in England.

At the recent ATL annual conference, Bousted told delegates, “Teachers feel under pressure to get their pupils ready for literacy and numeracy tests, but it’s simply inappropriate for them to be introduced to a formal curriculum.... In other countries children don’t have formal lessons until they are six or seven, and there is no evidence that they lose out as a result of that.”

A report commissioned by the union from researchers at Cambridge University and Anglia Polytechnic University found that reception age children, who under the primary curriculum are supposed to learn through play, not formal lessons, were “being too rigidly drilled in the basics, and they are not having a curriculum which enables them to be creative.”

Bousted criticised the government’s “misguided” approach to testing—a “one size fits all” approach dreamed up by “teenage scribblers” in the DfES. “It has led to children becoming bored and disaffected. It has resulted in too many children feeling, at the age of seven, that they are failures—and because they feel that school has rejected them, they reject school.”

Although not uniform across the country, statistical rises in school arson have been recorded in areas formerly associated with heavy industry. With the virtual shutting down of much of Britain’s traditional industries such as coal mining, steel production and shipbuilding during the past two decades, youth in large areas of the country are either jobless or offered work for poverty pay.

Poverty is a major contributory factor in the disillusionment of youth. With a growing number of families experiencing financial hardships, young people are suffering strained relations with parents, social exclusion and disenchantment with schooling institutions. Last year, a report by Save the Children UK on child poverty found that 8 percent of British children (numbering approximately 1 million) were severely poor and 37 percent were non-severely poor. In other words, 45 percent of Britain’s children can be defined as poor.

Such is the hostility of this government toward the difficulties faced by children and young people and so evident is its inability to offer a considered response that it reacts in a purely punitive manner. Hence its plans for £100 penalty fines for parents of truanting children; the proliferation of CCTV cameras in school corridors with a virtual lockdown at some schools (complete with padlocked gates); and the demand that all incidents involving assault in schools should be automatically referred to the police, and dealt with more harshly by the courts.

Although only a minority of school fire-starters are caught, some heavy sentences on older youth have been announced in recent years. In one of the first exchanges of the year, the government was urged at Lords question time, by Labour’s Lord Harrison, to be tough on pupils who believe schools “are there more for torching than teaching.”

Research into young fire-starters suggests that very few are hardened pyromaniacs, and that in the great majority of cases they are only attempting to express their anger or gain attention. Psychologist Andrew Muckley, of Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, has carried out lengthy research on young fire-starters and opposes punishment as a solution.

Commenting in 2000, Muckley said, “Many fire setters don’t do well at school and can’t communicate well. 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.”

At a recent seminar held to discuss the problem of arson in schools, Muckley declared that “the UK is the fire-setting capital of the world.” He outlined the beginnings of the approach in a Durham day care centre where it was found that 30 percent of the children had a history of fire-setting, even though it was not necessarily on their records. Rather than manage it, they decided to adopt a model that addresses the behaviour involved. He noted that 90 percent success rates had been reported by schemes where fire-setting behaviour is addressed.

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.... The fire is an end product. It’s the symptom of their problems. Targeted against property [it] can be a cry for help, a communication of distress.”

Zurich Municipal has urged the government to include the installation of sprinkler systems in new schools, particularly at a time when it has launched a school rebuilding programme. Zurich said only 150 out of more than 28,000 schools had installed sprinklers so far. It says putting a sprinkler system into all existing schools would cost £3 billion. This is about 5 percent of the cost of a new building, equivalent to the cost of carpeting a school building.

The DfES has said that such fire prevention measures were decisions to be taken by individual schools and local education authorities. Meanwhile many schools are bracing themselves for the annual exam-time rise in arson attacks next month. May is the peak time for malicious fire-setting in schools, thanks to a combination of exam pressure, warm weather and brighter evenings.



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