



Fighting fire with fire investigation

The destructive power of fire is something we all dread: the thought of a much-loved house, full of history and memories, groaning as its stumps buckle under the assault of a ferocious heat; treasured baby photos curling and blackening, licked by flames until they eventually disintegrate into cinders; a school classroom decorated with hand drawn pictures; a small business, shelves full of stock, finally beginning to stand on its own two feet.

Wherever it occurs, fire can have devastating consequences. Unfortunately, not all fires are the result of faulty electric wiring or the careless use of candles.

The Arson Investigation Unit, a specialist investigative unit operating within the Fraud and Corporate Crime Group, is at the frontline in combating arson and fire-related crime in Queensland.

The Queensland Police Service identifies six major motives for arson offences: revenge, fraud, crime concealment, the desire to be a hero, pyromania, and common vandalism. Each of

these motives adds a particular dimension to the investigation.

Detective Sergeant Damien Powell, Officer in Charge Arson Investigation Unit, said arson investigation was a unique area within police investigations, as the crime scene was often considered to be destroyed.

“This is not always the case as valuable evidence is often preserved at or nearby the scene,” Detective Sergeant Powell said.

“DNA, fingerprints and electronic data have all survived fire scenes and led to successful prosecutions.

“A trained investigator can always uncover valuable evidence, and Arson Unit investigators work very closely with scientific staff to ensure all possible evidence is recovered.

“Examining the wreckage of a fire, it is often possible to learn how and where a fire was started. For instance the way light bulbs are damaged or how panes of glass crack can reveal how a fire spread and how hot it was. These can be crucial details.”

Detective Sergeant Powell said that many arson cases were also the subject of civil proceedings and insurance claims and police could be called to give evidence.

“Another unique facet of our work is the number of external experts and corporate entities who are interested or assist in the police investigation.

“Professional relationships fostered by the Arson Unit with these stakeholders have developed an invaluable resource pool to assist police investigations throughout the state.

“With contacts across the insurance industry, motor vehicle manufacturers, forensic locksmiths and scientists, and many government departments, the avenues of inquiry are numerous.”

The highly specialised nature of arson investigation has seen the development of an intensive two-week Arson Investigation Course held at the Police Academy every year.

“The course includes visiting ‘live’ fire scenes, conducting

comparison burns on vehicles and assessing a real fire scene at the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service Live Fire facility,” Detective Sergeant Powell said.

“About 20 guest lecturers are enlisted including forensic pathologists, prosecutors from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and numerous government and insurance investigators. It is an interesting course but definitely challenging.”

A significant number of arson offenders are classified as recidivist or serial offenders. These people may be pyromaniacs who are pathologically driven to set fires. Others may harbour a desire to play the hero by saving people or property after a fire has been lit.

The Arson Investigation Unit maintains a database of offenders that police can access when investigating arson-related incidents. To date more than 600 offenders have been identified with two or more convictions for setting fires.

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