

23 Incident Indicators

So what are the indicators that every officer should consider when sizing up a fire scene from an origin-and-cause perspective? What are the indicators that will help determine if further investigation is warranted? There are a number of them, but taken individually, they are not definitive indicators. However, several of them—taken together—might raise a “red flag” for the officer. We’ve organized 23 of these indicators into a list you can save and refer to later.

Some of these indicators include:

1. Who called in the alarm? (What kind of information did they give to the dispatcher? Was it overly detailed, or did it include information that the average caller wouldn’t know?)

2. As you were pulling up on the scene, what color was the smoke and the fire? (Was it an unusual color, considering the fuel that was burning? Where was it coming from? Multiple locations? Were there any unusual sounds, such as explosions?)

3. Were you delayed in responding because of a false alarm or a small fire, such as a trash fire? (Or were there barriers, such as locked fences or obstacles, that slowed your attack? Had the hydrant been tampered with? These tactics could be used to allow the fire more time to grow.)

4. Was there anyone in the crowd that you have seen at fires before? (Did anyone look as if they were behaving unusually?)

5. Was there any unusual evidence, such as containers, matches, lighters, etc., that might not normally be found in the area? (According to a joint study conducted by the ATF and FBI, over 50 percent of the serial arsonists studied left items at the scene of their fires.)

6. Had doors been propped open, or holes made in floors or walls, to help accelerate the spread of the fire from one area to another?

7. Were there any vehicles leaving the scene as you pulled up, or shortly after you arrived? (Most people are going to stay to watch a fire, rather than leave.)

8. Have you been to this property before? (Does it have a history of fires? This could be an indicator of someone attempting to burn the building, either for profit or for revenge.)

9. Were there signs of forced entry such as broken doors, locks or windows? (If the fire is determined to be incendiary, the lack of any evidence of forcible entry can be as important as its existence.)

10. Were there multiple points of origin? (To ensure greater destruction, and to make suppression efforts more difficult, an arsonist could set multiple fires throughout a building.)

11. Was a burglar alarm sounding when you arrived? (If it was equipped with an alarm, did it go off when you made entry? If not, why not?)

12. Was the building’s fire alarm or sprinkler system impaired in some way? (An arsonist could do this to ensure that the fire was not detected or suppressed until it had a chance to do significant damage.)

13. Did you smell anything unusual?

14. Was the behavior of the fire unusual?

(Did it take an unusual amount of time or water to get it under control, considering what should normally have been burning?)

15. Did the fire start in an unusual location where there would normally not be any source of ignition? (For example, did the fire start in a pile of debris outside the building and then extend into the building.)

16. How was the owner's behavior when he or she arrived? (Unusually calm? Extreme mood swings? How was he dressed? For example, if the fire occurred in the middle of the night, was the owner impeccably groomed upon arrival?)

17. Did the neighbors have any information that might point to this being an unusual fire? (Arguments, past fires, etc.)

18. Did the contents seem appropriate? (For example, was anything missing that should normally be in place, such as stock or equipment? Were the clothes closets empty?)

19. Were the windows covered to delay the fire being seen from the exterior? (This would give the fire a chance to grow before being detected.)

20. Was anyone taking pictures or videotape of the fire when you arrived?

21. Are there unusual burn patterns? (Trailers that would lead the fire from one area to another may leave a distinctive pattern on the floor, as could flammable liquid.)

22. Is the property for sale, or in distress? (Is it under any orders for repairs to be made? Having a fire might be a convenient method to avoid expensive repairs.)

23. When water was applied, did the fire react in a different way than you would have expected?

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