

The High Cost of Arson

by Brian Ó Murchú

Detailed statistics in relation to Arson attacks on property in Ireland are difficult to obtain, but the number of recently reported incidents in Belfast, Limerick, and Wicklow would suggest that this form of crime is on the increase.

In recent months, there have been a number of reported arson attacks on lightweight framed buildings, which would suggest that this form of construction is particularly susceptible to fire damage in the construction phase. This is particularly the case since the structural materials are either highly combustible or have inadequate fire resistance in the absence of fire protection. Whereas, arson attacks on lightweight framed buildings are random in Ireland, in Scotland there are reports that organised crime have identified the 'security' of lightweight framed buildings (during construction) as a lucrative area of business.

Recently reported attacks on buildings under construction in Ireland include the setting fire to the renal unit in Altnagelvin hospital in Belfast. The building which was nearing completion was completely destroyed with estimated damage costs in the region of a quarter of a million pounds sterling. A similar arson attack took place on the Kilteragh estate in Duradoyle, Limerick where 'superwarm' lightweight framed homes were being constructed and in Newtownmountkennedy where a timber frame office block was set alight by vandals, while still under construction.

A number of effective measures can be taken to reduce the incidence & impact of arson attacks and some excellent guides are readily available on this subject. A subject which has not yet been addressed however, is the increase in arson attacks on buildings in the construction phase.

Building security issues relate to damage to property such as graffiti, broken windows, theft of property etc.

However, arson attacks involving setting fire to the contents and fabric of the building, is the most serious and destructive security breach. Astonishingly, statistics indicate that almost 80% of all businesses which are subjected to serious fires go out of business. Unprotected and intermittently occupied buildings such as school buildings are particularly vulnerable to arson.

A report produced by the Department of Education in 2004 described the factors contributing to security-related problems in schools and the most prevalent types of security threats. The report stated (based on insurance statistics) that malicious fires represent 87% of the payout costs to insurers even though they represent only 19% of reported claims.

In his presentation to the Fire Safety Conference in Dublin's Radisson Hotel on the 30th June 2005, Andrew Hedges, Senior Fire Engineer with Arup, presented a number of startling statistics in relation to arson attacks in the U.K.

Referring specifically to fires in schools, almost 50% of all fires are caused by arson of which 93% were caused by young people under the age of 18 years. The national cost of fires in schools rose from Sterling £23 million in 1993 to almost Sterling £97million in 2002. In the U.K. schools account for 20% of all major fire losses.

In the course of his presentation Mr. Hedges highlighted some 'Key Fire Safety Design Issues' in relation to the containment of fires in school buildings. With regard to the fabric of the building he suggested that combustible cladding and combustible structural materials & finishes should be reduced or completely avoided. According to Mr. Hedges careful consideration should also be given to passive fire protection measures including the use of cavity barriers, compartmentation and fire doors. He pointed out that installing sprinkler systems could help to reduce insurance costs and that a cost/benefit analysis should be carried out to establish viability.

