Using crime prevention theory in bushfire arson prevention

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Bushfire arson in Australia
AIC research (Muller 2009) found that:
• Approximately half of bushfires are suspicious or deliberately lit
• Crime is easy to commit and conceal
  – Because of this, arsonists are not often caught making it difficult to learn about their motivation
• According to various research,
  – approximately 51 percent of bushfire arsonists caught are under 18 years of age
  – where arson offenders are convicted, fewer than a third receive a prison sentence
• Most arsonists do not exclusively commit arson—offenders tend to have extensive criminal histories, particularly characterised by violent and property offences
• Bushfires are quite patterned (e.g. time, place), therefore there is potential to map and predict where fires are most likely to occur.

Risk factors for bushfires in Australia
• Weather (e.g. drought, topography, local vegetation)
• Time and day
• Rural – urban interface
• Socio-economic factors.

Why use crime prevention theory in bushfire arson prevention?
• Provides a framework to target what we know about bushfire arson
• It is important to focus on primary prevention due to low probability of arsonists getting caught
• Situational Crime Prevention and Routine Activities Theory focus on disrupting arson occurring by making it harder to commit
• They suggest crime can only occur if there is a suitable target, absence of a capable guardian (that is, someone who could prevent or stop arson from occurring), and a motivated offender
• This is often called the crime triangle.

To prevent bushfire arson, you need to remove one or more elements of that triangle, usually by proposing interventions that look at altering the physical environment, targeting the offender, and/or targeting the potential victim.

Prevention activities need to:
• Reduce returns of bushfire arson
• Increase risks of committing the bushfire arson
• Increase the effort to commit bushfire arson
• Remove excuses for the behaviour
• Remove provocation for the behaviour.

How do we apply crime prevention theory to bushfire arson prevention?
• Prevention strategies often require cooperation or partnerships with fire agencies, police, and the local community
• Adequate time, resources and commitment are required to properly implement successful projects

Bushfire arson prevention workshop booklet resources (in development)
• Based on research and crime prevention theory
• Developed with stakeholders in workshops in the ACT and NSW
• Provide a step-by-step guide on the processes involved in developing bushfire arson prevention strategies
• Illustrate case study examples of successful bushfire arson committees and projects
• Provide worksheet resource templates for each element of the process outlined to assist in BFP development
• For use in planning prevention strategies and as workshop exercises.