

Police, firefighters concerned by arsons in Annapolis, Kings counties

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This abandoned house on a dirt road intersecting Ruggles Road in Wilmot was levelled by flames in the early morning hours of April 7. (ASHLEY THOMPSON)

A significant number of incidents of suspected arson in the eastern part of Annapolis County and the western end of Kings County over the past five years has police, the public and firefighters concerned.

RCMP statistics from 2013 to this past April show there were 130 reported incidents of arson or suspected arson dealt with by Kingston RCMP, who cover the western part of Kings County, and Annapolis County RCMP.

Police say they list such fires as “reported incidents,” because what is initially reported as arson may later be determined to be an accidental fire.

The stats include 30 vehicles and 56 structures. The buildings include houses, abandoned buildings, sheds, commercial buildings and cottages.

Other fires reported as probable arsons included portable toilets, a fence, house decorations, a mailbox and a newspaper.

Staff-Sgt. Dan MacGillivray, with Annapolis RCMP, said some fires were found to not be arsons, “but we do know that there were fire that have occurred in close proximity in geography and time.”

He said the fires are still under investigation, and the RCMP are working with the fire marshal’s office.

Of the 130 incidents since 2013, 75 have been in Annapolis County

“I can’t say that they’re all linked, but we feel that there are some that give rise to further investigation (of being connected),” he said.

“That’s one avenue we’re pursuing. We do analysis, we have a crime analyst looking at them. There is definitely reason for us to pursue that avenue of thought. We haven’t been able to confirm anything, but we’re actively investigating a number of these fires in the eastern end of the county.”

He said a lot of the fires were in abandoned buildings.

“We’re trying to determine if any of them are linked and, if so, who (is responsible).”

MacGillivray said his office’s senior safety co-ordinator is hearing concerns from residents and different community groups.

He said police are looking for the public’s help in tracking down those responsible, and in reporting suspicious activity like vehicles parked along roads at night with no one around.

“It’s the public who would know who should be in an area and who shouldn’t, and what is suspicious behaviour.”

The fires happen primarily at night, and RCMP have increased patrols in areas where there have been several blazes.

“Any time there are suspicious fires like that, the chance of injury to fire personnel and first responders is high, and to community members,” MacGillivray said.

While many of the fires have been at the eastern end of Annapolis County, they are not limited to that area.

Just three weeks ago, a vacant house burned on Perotte Road outside Annapolis Royal in a suspected case of arson.

The Middleton fire department, located in the centre of Annapolis County, has responded to its share of suspicious fires as well as helping at the others calls received by neighbouring departments.

Middleton fire chief Mike Toole said the fires take their toll on firefighters, equipment, and budgets.

“The ones that we’ve had lately have mostly been in abandoned buildings, but you’re tying up volunteer hours, taking them away from their work, there’s the cost of fuel to run the apparatus, and maintenance costs,” he said.

Firefighting foam, which helps put fires out faster, is \$200 per 20-litre pail. Toole said they try to not use the product on abandoned structures because of the cost.

Fatigue is also an issue, both on the scene and the next day when firefighters are at work, Toole said.

He said that while many of the fires are in abandoned buildings, firefighters never assume they’re empty.

“Someone could be homeless and inside in a corner,” he said. And that means firefighters still have to search buildings when they can.

“It’s dangerous,” he said. “The floor could be gone . . . and the next thing you know I have two guys going in the front door who could be hurt.”

But that doesn’t always happen with arsons, he said, because the home is usually fully involved in flames before firefighters arrive, which means no one is going inside.

Simon Sherry, a psychologist and the director of clinical training at Dalhousie University’s department of psychology and neuroscience, said many people start fires as a criminal act with a deliberate attempt to burn something,

He said when it comes to motives, “there is a diversity of potential motives for something like arson. You have anger and revenge, some people are going to do it for material gain, some people are going to do it as an overall pattern of criminality and deviance, and some people are going to do it as part of a major mental health problem.”

He said some people see fire as entertainment, and some have poor impulse control.

But burning something through a criminal act is not the same as pyromania, he said.

Pyromania is a mental disorder or a psychiatric disorder, but only accounts for 3.5 per cent of arsonists, Sherry said.

He said pyromaniacs deliberately set fires because they have a preoccupation, curiosity or fascination with anything to do with fire. That can include setting fires, firefighting, fire departments, fire alarms, fire trucks and lights and sirens.

“Just about anything related to fire is a preoccupation, if not an obsession,” Sherry said.

He said there seems to be pleasure, gratification and relief that accompanies fire setting, as if a tension builds and the setting of the fire provides relief.

He said, though, that incidents of sexual gratification being associated with pyromania are extremely low, despite the prevalence in movies and TV fiction.

Research has shown that pyromaniacs and arsonists are most likely going to be male, with below-average intelligence, and likely started setting fires around age 18 and have accompanying mental health issues such as depression or psychosis.

“With pyromania, you have someone who is almost straddling a line between criminal behaviour and mental illness,” Sherry said.

He said pyromania “is not a well developed area of scientific inquiry. We know very little about arsonists and pyromaniacs. This is predominantly case study-driven literature with a smattering of empirical studies. This science is very much in its infancy.”

Therapy and education are two of the main ways to deal with individuals who set fires for reasons other than criminality, and there is preliminary evidence that some medications can be helpful, he said.

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