

# **U.S. Fire Administration TOPICAL FIRE RESEARCH SERIES**

**Volume 1, Issue 1  
October 2000 (Rev. December 2001)**

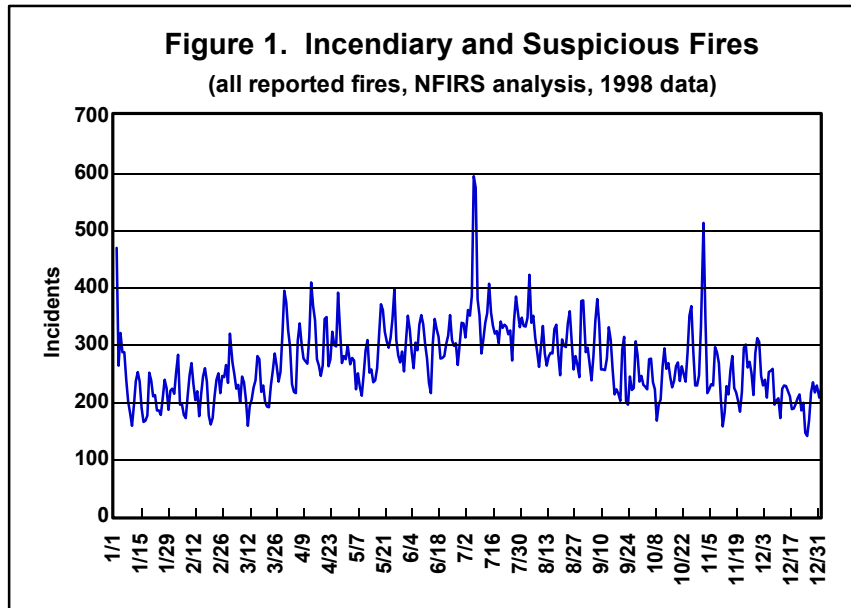
## **Halloween Fires**

### **FINDINGS**

- Over a 3-day period around Halloween, a 3-year average of 15,500 fires caused \$92 million in property loss, 45 deaths, and 175 injuries.
- Many Halloween fires, especially those in vacant or abandoned buildings, are the result of arson. Alcohol or drugs were a factor in 20% of these fires.
- Open flame fires increases by 50% over this period, largely due to the increased use of candles.
- Some communities have adopted fire-related “watch” programs during the Halloween period, with some success.

Sources: NFPA and NFIRS

On both Halloween and the evening before, popularly called "Devil's Night," the occurrence of fire increases in both structures and outdoors. As Halloween has typically been associated with activities and cultural icons related to mischief, it is not surprising to find that the origin of many these fires is suspicious or incendiary. In fact, arson fires on these days are nearly 10 percent higher than the national average (Figure 1).



Some communities have had significant incidences of Devil's Night and Halloween arson fires. In 1994, Detroit, Michigan, experienced a record number of Devil's Night arson fires. Since then, Detroit and other communities throughout the nation have initiated programs to report suspicious activity around the area on the nights of October 29, 30, and 31.<sup>1</sup>

Although Devil's Night and Halloween arson are often targeted at abandoned buildings and vacant lots, previous studies and current NFIRS analysis show that the estimated property loss in dollars during this time (10/30–11/1) is somewhat higher than the rest of the year.<sup>2</sup> Also, during this time period, there are a slightly lower incidence of injuries and a higher incidence of fatalities (Figure 2).

MEASURE	3-YEAR AVERAGE	30 OCT–1 NOV
Dollar Loss/Incident	\$5,619	\$6,944
Injuries/1,000 Incidents	15.7	13.5
Fatalities/1,000 Incidents	2.4	3.1

In addition to an increased incidence of arson, the Halloween period also generally experiences an increase in fires caused by open flame, which is related to the increase use of candles at this time of the year. Overall, 0.6 percent of all fires are caused by candles in contrast to 0.9 percent of fires between 10/30 and 11/1 (3-year average).

Although the scope of its involvement is difficult to quantify from NFIRS, substance abuse has a proven role in contributing to violent crime, including arson. In a 2-year study of 675 instances of

structure arson, alcohol or drugs were a factor in nearly 20 percent of fires.<sup>3</sup> This may contribute to the increased incidence of fires on Halloween given the popularity of costume parties or other celebrations where alcohol is served.

Candles are a popular home decoration, both in jack-o-lanterns and alone. Some Halloween novelty candles have been recalled in recent years due to safety concerns over the height of the flames they produce. One candle, recalled in 1996, was shaped like a hand, with a wick in each fingertip. When lit, the wicks could combine to produce flames more than 6 inches high.<sup>4</sup> Another candle, intended for use inside a jack-o-lantern, was recalled in 1999 because it also produced a high flame.<sup>5</sup>

Candles can be dangerous, especially when left unattended, so their use as decorations is discouraged. Also, children should not be allowed to carry candles; other light sources such as flashlights should be substituted.

Other holiday home decorations, including crepe paper and dried flowers, are also highly flammable and should be kept far from potential heat sources (e.g. candles, lights). Many ready-made costumes are flame resistant, but home-made ones are not. If ignited, such costumes have the potential to cause severe burns.

Over the 3-year period 1996–1998, an average of 15,500 fires occurred between October 30 and November 1. These fires caused 45 deaths, 175 injuries, and \$92 million in losses.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. *The Detroit News*, October 19, 1995.

2. *A Profile of the Seasonal Nature of Fires*, U.S. Fire Administration, to be published.

3. *The Connection Among Drugs, Alcohol, and Arson in Minnesota*, U.S. Fire Administration, April 1998.

4. Consumer Product Safety Commission, November 6, 1996.

5. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1999.

6. National estimates are based on National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) data (1996–98) and the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) annual survey, *Fire Loss in the United States*.

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