



## THE NATIONAL VACANT/ABANDONED BUILDING FIRE PROBLEM

*Fires in improperly secured vacant or abandoned buildings are a constant threat to firefighters, citizens and private property alike. We believe that these problems are manageable once communities recognize the urgency of the problem and act.*

*We are committed to making the facts and solutions known to government officials and private citizens alike so that a solution is found and pursued.*

GERARD NAYLIS, PRESIDENT  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ARSON INVESTIGATORS

### Arson Facts

- During the period 1993 through 1997 there were an annual average of 12,200 fires in buildings coded by responding fire departments as vacant. Because properties may be coded for their intended use rather than their current status, these figures probably underestimate the extent of the problem.<sup>1</sup>
- These fires resulted in an average of 10 civilian deaths and \$73 million in direct property damage each year.<sup>1</sup>
- Over 70% of fires in vacant property were incendiary or suspicious.<sup>2</sup>
- These fires accounted for more than four-fifths of the direct property losses in these buildings.<sup>2</sup>
- Twice as many child-play fires occurred in these buildings as in educational properties.<sup>2</sup>
- Fires in vacant buildings are dangerous to firefighters and often spread to occupied, insured structures.
- In 1999, Worcester firefighters entered a vacant, burning cold storage building to search for a homeless couple reported to have been in the building. Several firefighters became disoriented, and others went to their aid. Six became trapped and died in the fire. The homeless couple had left the premises after the fire began.<sup>3</sup>
- A 1987 abandoned Detroit warehouse fire killed one firefighter when it flashed over. The fire spread to an occupied paper and supply company. Two more firefighters died in the second structure when a wall collapsed as they tried to limit the fire's growth. Prior to the incident, the fire department had been called to extinguish several small fires in the vacant building. These fires had been started by vagrants for warmth.<sup>2</sup>

- In 1999 an arson by two juveniles in a vacant apartment block in Holyoke, Massachusetts spread to 11 other buildings resulting in a multi-million dollar loss including a cathedral.<sup>1</sup>
- Embers from a 1994 vacant Illinois warehouse fire ignited a plant a mile away from the fire. Because the local firefighters were still fighting the warehouse fire, plant employees had to use extinguishers until firefighters from another community arrived.<sup>2</sup>
- The injury *rate* per fire is 5.6 firefighter injuries per 100 special structure (including vacant buildings) fires compared to 1.9 injuries per fire at structure fires in general.<sup>4</sup>
- Because children and the homeless may frequent vacant buildings, firefighters cannot automatically assume these buildings are empty. These fires can be extremely hazardous to firefighters.
- Arson is the second leading cause of death by fire in the United States-topped only by smoking-and the main cause of property damage due to fires.
- Arsonists killed more than 500 Americans in 1996 and inflicted direct property damage totaling more than \$2 billion.
- One of every four fires-some 500,000-that occur in the U.S. each year are arson.

**Source:**

1. *The U.S. Fire Problem Overview Report: Leading Causes and Other Patterns and Trends*, Marty Ahrens, NFPA, April 2000

2. *Special Data Information Package, Structure Fires in Vacant or Idle Properties, or Properties Under Construction, Demolition or Renovation*, NFPA, MAY 2000

3. "1999 Firefighter Fatality Report" *Rita F. Fahy and Paul LeBlanc NFPA Journal*(, July/August 2000.

4. *Patterns of Firefighter Fireground Injuries*, Michael J. Karter, Jr., NFPA February 2000

5. *Drug Related Fires in the United States – A Preliminary Report of Research on the Relationship between Drug Activity and Arson in Selected U.S. Cities*, Donna B. Towerman and Thomas J. Towerman, Project report sponsored by the Bureau of Alcohol, tobacco and Firearms, Virginia Commonwealth University, Department of Justice and Risk Administration, 1993.

