

BACKGROUND ON CHURCH ARSON AND RELATED ISSUES

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Acknowledgements

For more information about the National Fire Protection Association, visit www.nfpa.org or call 617-770-3000. To learn more about the One-Stop Data Shop go to www.nfpa.org/osds or call 617-984-7450.

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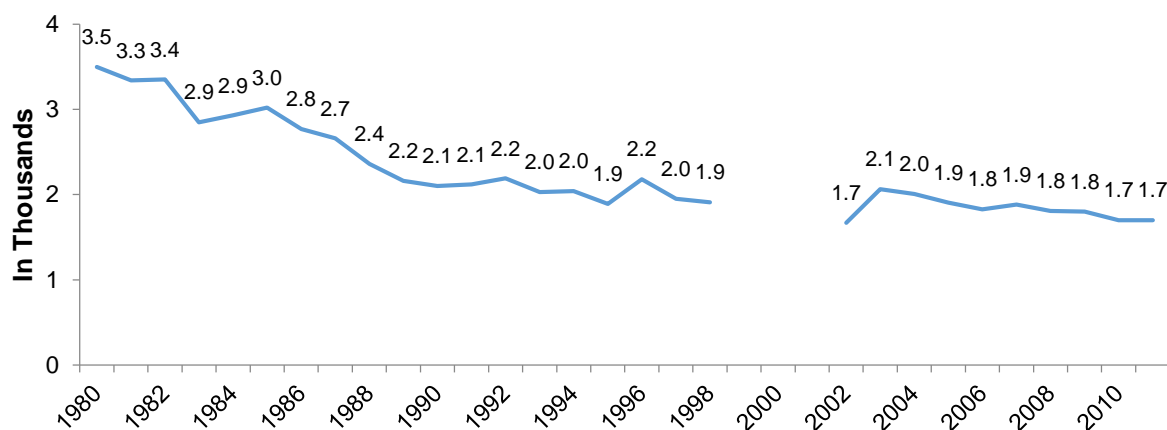
According to NFPA's 2013 report [U.S. Structure Fires in Religious and Funeral Properties](#) by Richard Campbell, local fire departments responded to an estimated average of 280 intentional structure fires per year at churches, other places of worship or funeral parlors during the five-year period of 2007-2011. Sixteen percent of the 1,780 structure fires per year at these properties were intentional. Thirty percent of the fires in these properties were caused by cooking and another 16% by heating equipment.

Data sources: NFPA uses the detailed data about fire incidents provided by local fire departments to the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). While the US Fire Administration administers NFIRS, different states set their own reporting requirements, ranging from mandatory for all incidents to completely voluntary. The same system is used to capture details about home fires, car fires, church fires and factory fires. The national database contains numerous data elements of coded information. NFPA uses the detail provided by NFIRS combined with the results from our annual fire department experience survey, to estimate the size of various aspects of the fire problem. *We do not track individual cases of church arson.* The National Church Arson Task Force was collecting such information in the late 1990s after the [Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996](#).

Because of major changes to NFIRS introduced in 1999 and adopted gradually over the next several years, it is very difficult to compare trends from before 1999 with the years after. In earlier versions of NFIRS, cause choices included “incendiary” or “suspicious,” among many other options. In the current version, these were replaced with the term “intentional.” The data element was required for all fires in the past. In the current version, causal data is not required for trash or rubbish fires that did not spread to other contents or the structure itself. Even some of the property use classifications changed.

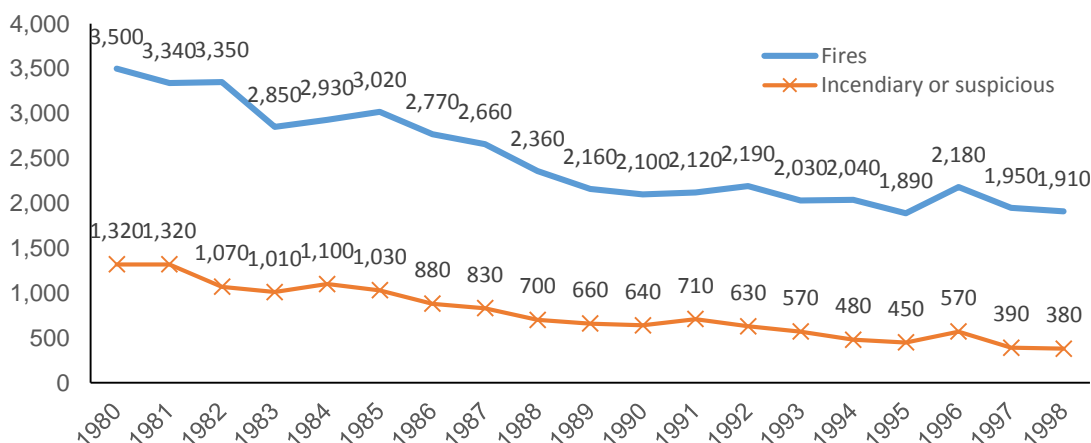
Trend data: Figure 1 shows structure fires in these properties by year. Estimates were unstable during the transition years of 1999-2001 and are not shown.

Figure 1. Reported Structure Fires in Religious or Funeral Properties by Year 1980-2011



The data for Figure 2 comparing incendiary or suspicious structure fires in these properties with all structure fires at these properties from 1980 through 1998 was obtained from the 2001 version of NFPA's report *Structure Fires in Religious and Funeral Properties*, by Marty Ahrens.

Figure 2. Reported Structure Fires and Incendiary or Suspicious Structure in Religious or Funeral Properties by Year, 1980-1998



Note that a proportional share of religious and funeral parlor fires in which the ignition factor was unknown or not reported were included with the incendiary or suspicious fires.

Additional Information

[Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996](#)

National Church Arson Task Force Reports for the President

- [First Year Report](#)- June 1997
- [Second Year Report](#)- October 1998
- [Third Year Report](#)-January 2000
- [Fourth Year Report](#)- September 2000 (This report also contains [NCATF's 2000 Threat Assessment Guide for Houses of Worship](#) which specifically focuses on fire (not just arson) and bombing)

The Fourth Year report states that from January 1, 1995 through August 15, 2000,

- The National Church Arson Task Force (NCATF) had opened investigations into 945 arsons, bombings or attempted bombings at places of worship.
- One-third of the incidents occurred at African-American places of worship.
- 431 suspects were arrested by local, state or federal law officials for 342 incidents, an arrest rate of 36%.

- 305 defendants were convicted in 224 of these arsons. Forty-six (58%) of the 79 defendants convicted on federal charges related to arson or bombing were “motivated by bias.”
- While some arsons were racially motivated, they found the usual range of other motives such as vandalism, mental health issues, burglary cover-up, retribution against religious authorities, other disputes and financial profit.
- 14% of the people arrested for these arsons were between 6 and 13 years of age, while one-quarter were between 14 and 17.
- Three-quarters of the arrestees were white males. However, 37% of the people arrested for incidents at African American places of worship were themselves African American; 63% were white.
- On July 11, 2000, one man pleaded guilty to starting 26 church fires in eight states between 1994 and 1999.
- The NCATF activities were incorporated into other agencies as the issue was addressed.

The report also looks specifically at incidents involving African American places of worship in the South.

Additional Resources:

[FEMA's June 2013 Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Places of Worship](#)

[NCATF's 2000 Threat Assessment Guide for Houses of Worship](#) (specifically focuses on fire (not just arson) and bombing)