



# FIRE AS A WEAPON



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The United States faces increasingly complex threats from terrorism and targeted violence. Historically, assailants have used fire as a weapon to target critical infrastructure. The tactic can include attacks such as arson, improvised incendiary devices (IIDs), deliberate forest fires, and more. Assailants use fire as a weapon to target public gathering events and individuals directly. Incidents of fire used as a weapon have increased recently as malicious actors choose the readily available means for an attack. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) prepared this action guide to provide information to all first responders, security professionals, and the general public to mitigate a potential incident of fire as a weapon.

## RECENT STATISTICS

Statistics show an increase of assailants using fire as a weapon to damage critical infrastructure, target public gathering places, and harm communities. According to open source data, IIDs were the most commonly used device type during recent mass demonstration incidents.\*

**Arsons increased 29.8%** from 29,694 incidents in 2021, to 38,539 in 2022.<sup>1</sup>



**147** fires started by incendiary devices at educational institutions.



**66%** of 5,919 incendiary fires reported in the Bomb Arson Tracking System (BATS) took place against vehicles and residential buildings.

**There were 5,919 Improvised Incendiary Devices (IIDs) incidents in 2022.**



**Sunday, Monday, Tuesday** are three of the most common days that incendiary fires occurred.



**43%** of incendiary fires took place between 9:00 p.m. and 6 a.m.



**79** fatalities were associated with incendiary incidents.<sup>2</sup>

An **improvised incendiary device** is defined as a device placed or fabricated in an improvised manner incorporating chemical mixtures and flammable liquids that cause fire and are designed to destroy, incapacitate, harass, or distract.

**Arson** is defined as any willful or malicious burning or attempt to burn, with or without intent to defraud, a dwelling house, public building, motor vehicle or aircraft, or other such personal property of another.

\* Sources:

- CISA Office for Bombing Prevention (OBP) [TRIPwire](#)
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [Uniform Crime Reporting Program \(UCR\)](#)



## NOTABLE EVENTS

- In **June 2024**, assailants in Dagestan, Russia killed 20 people at multiple sites, including a house of worship. The assault was a complex coordinated attack using both firearms and IIDs.<sup>3</sup>
- In **January 2024**, authorities arrested a man in San Jose, California, in connection with a bomb case from 2022. The suspect reportedly left a “functional” homemade incendiary device on the street in front of the home of a city council member.<sup>4</sup>
- In **January 2024**, authorities arrested and charged an individual in Summerville, South Carolina for allegedly committing arson by burning construction equipment during protests against “cop city” in Atlanta.<sup>5</sup>
- In **September 2023**, a series of arson attacks hit schools across Belgium in Brussels, Liege, and Wallonia. Investigations are ongoing but law enforcement has linked them to outrage over a new sexual education program.<sup>6</sup>
- In **April 2023**, two businesses in Gaston County, North Carolina, were targeted by an improvised incendiary device. This resulted in significant damage to infrastructure and inventory, law enforcement is investigating as intentional arson.<sup>7</sup>
- In **December 2022**, law enforcement in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma arrested a man for allegedly manufacturing improvised incendiary devices at his place of employment. Reports of an explosion at his residence led to an investigation of the suspect’s workplace in a warehouse, where 6 completed IIDs were found, with 6 more “being built”.<sup>8</sup>
- In **June 2019**, a California man was sentenced to death for setting the Esperanza fire in 2006, an incident resulting in the death of five US Forest Service firefighters. The individual was a known arsonist and used a combination of matches and cigarettes to start the fires.<sup>9</sup>

## POTENTIAL INDICATORS

The threat of fire as a weapon may be difficult to detect until the attack is underway. However, paying careful attention to, and promptly **reporting** the following warning signs could help mitigate a potential incident:

- Damaged or tampered fire protection systems and equipment.
- Suspicious or unattended items—including bags and propane tanks—that may contain incendiary devices.
- Suspicious questioning of building floor plans, locations of egress, and elevators, as well as fire extinguishers, water supply, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems.
- Unusual quantities or locations of fire precursors, including accelerants, paints, degreasers, alcohol-based cleaners, aerosols, and propane gas tanks.
- Social media messaging that promotes ‘fire as a weapon’ imagery or ideas for carrying out attacks.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IN CASE OF A FIRE ATTACK?

- Call 9-1-1 and follow directions from emergency personnel.
- Leave the area of the fire activity immediately and alert others, if possible.
- Avoid areas where you can smell smoke or see fire.
- Evacuate indoor premises; close all doors behind you to contain the fire. If you are unable to evacuate, move as far away as possible from the hazard and use fire extinguishers as needed.
- Maintain situational awareness and watch for suspicious activity or additional threats.

## PROTECTIVE MEASURES AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

### Protective Measures

- Engage local emergency medical service (EMS) personnel to develop an Emergency Action Plan. Consider the need for adequate access to fire control and suppression materials, first aid stations, triage areas, fire and EMS vehicle staging, as well as additional emergency routes in and out of the facility.
- Post signage showing fire and emergency entry and exit points, first-aid stations, and prohibited items in the facility.
- Train personnel to identify suspicious activity and report it to law enforcement; exercise emergency plans that include fire incidents.

### Mitigation Strategies

- Define the perimeter and areas that require access control for pedestrians and vehicles; identify areas that require special access controls (e.g., control rooms, communications centers, computer server rooms, fuel or chemical storage tanks, and HVAC and other mechanical equipment).
- Employ monitoring, surveillance, and inspection consistent with facility and venue operations and associated security requirements.
- Identify and maintain an inventory with the quantity, location of use, and storage of combustible materials—including paints, degreasers, alcohol-based cleaners, aerosols, and propane gas tanks, among others—that could be accelerants.
- Inspect packages, briefcases, backpacks, parcels, and luggage as employees, contractors, vendors, visitors, and patrons enter the site; ensure inspections are in accordance with facility policies and applicable laws.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Connect with a CISA Protective Security Advisor: [cisa.gov/protective-security-advisors](https://cisa.gov/protective-security-advisors)

Connect with CISA's Infrastructure Security: [cisa.gov/infrastructure-security](https://cisa.gov/infrastructure-security)

Connect with CISA's Office for Bombing Prevention: [cisa.gov/obp](https://cisa.gov/obp)

Connect with CISA's Infrastructure Exercises: [cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-exercises](https://cisa.gov/critical-infrastructure-exercises)

- 1 Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2023. "FBI Releases 2022 Crime in the Nation Statistics." Accessed July 31, 2024. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-2022-crime-in-the-nation-statistics>
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- 6 The Brussels Times. 2023. "From protest to 'terrorism': Sexual education policy sparks controversy and arson." Accessed July 31, 2024. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/691800/sexual-education-controversy-chool-hit-by-arson-attack-in-suspected-protest-against-sexual-education-tbtb>
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- 9 NBC Los Angeles. 2021. "'They Were Protectors': Remembering the Five Firefighters Killed 15 Years Ago in the Esperanza Fire." Accessed July 31, 2024. <https://www.nbclausangeles.com/news/california-wildfires/firefighters-esperanza-wildfire-riverside-county/2732517/>