

## As economy improves, for-profit arson drops in Dallas

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By TRISTAN HALLMAN

Staff Writer

[thallman@dallasnews.com](mailto:thallman@dallasnews.com)

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An improving economy has thrown cold water on arson in Dallas, fire officials say.

The number of fires ruled arson, fires that are intentionally set, has dropped nearly 35 percent in Dallas since fiscal year 2009. The burn of arsonists has long been slowing nationwide, but Dallas Fire-Rescue Deputy Chief Tameji Berry, who oversees arson investigations, said improved financial situations have driven the short-term drop in the city.

During the financial crisis, more financially underwater homes and cars were going up in flames, she said.

"Quite honestly, with some people, that became a way of life for them — how to get from under some of the obligations they had, how to get some type of money or earnings," Berry said. "It was a desperate situation for some."

Marty Ahrens, senior fire analysis services manager for the National Fire Prevention Association, said for-profit arsons haven't been as prevalent for a while.

"Paper trails are much easier to track these days than before the advent of electronic records," she said.

Simple vandalism and other factors are more commonly behind arson, Ahrens said. And more than 40 percent of arrestees nationwide are younger than 18, meaning they are kids experimenting with fire, she said.

Dallas Fire-Rescue spokesman Jason Evans said the department's decades-old Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Program, an education initiative aimed at teaching children about the dangers of starting fires, has also contributed to the reduction.

In addition, the "Burn an Arsonist for Cold Cash" program has helped catch arsonists and deter others, Dallas officials say. The program, run by Crime Stoppers, has paid out \$14,700 for 20 tips that led to arrests and indictments of arsonists since 2006.

Arson is most prevalent in big cities and small rural areas and remains the biggest single cause of fires in Dallas. Intentionally set fires made up 39 percent of the 1,337 fires investigated by Dallas Fire-Rescue last year. Electrical fires, by comparison, made up 18 percent of the blazes.

The fall in arsons outpaced the drop in the number of fire investigations, which were down 23 percent since 2009.

Berry, the deputy chief, said there are no arson hotspots in the city for the department to target, saying they appear to jump all over "like hopscotch." And she said weather patterns can also lead to spikes or drops in arsons.

But Berry said she is still confident that the arson trend lines will continue to fall in Dallas through the department's education efforts.

"We're trying to always stay ahead of the curve," she said. "We don't want to stay where we are, but because of the nature of an arson case and all that goes into it, it's not just a shut and close at all times."

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