

Safer Custody Quick-time Learning Bulletin

Issue 2: Cell Fires and Self-Harm

WHO NEEDS TO SEE THIS BULLETIN?

This bulletin is for **ALL STAFF** who have contact with prisoners

You may wish to **print out copies** of this bulletin and distribute around your establishment.

Although there have been relatively few self-inflicted deaths as a result of cell fires/ smoke inhalation, (19 since 1978), a recent SCOP study demonstrates that 28% of prisoners involved in a fire incident will also be involved in a self harm incident; highlighting the need to consider opening an ACCT document on prisoners who set fires in custody.

Setting a fire can be an act of self-harm as well as a serious breach of discipline and requires an appropriate response. Where it is evidenced that fire-setting was an act of self-harm disciplinary charges should not normally be brought. This applies equally to repetitive acts of self-harm.

NOMS response to self-harm or attempted self-harm must be to look to the care of the individual prisoner as its priority. If early signs of a tendency to self-harm are overlooked or met with a punitive response, the risk of eventual tragedy may be increased. The threat of punishment should not form part of the strategy for dealing with such behaviour.

However, exceptionally a disciplinary charge may be brought in respect of endangering the health and safety of others arising from setting a fire. The person managing the incident should decide whether it is likely that the prisoner intended to cause injury to others or was reckless as to this. If s/he is satisfied about intention or recklessness, a charge may be brought under the Code of Discipline. Otherwise the events should be interpreted as an indication of severe distress which does not warrant a punitive response. (PSO 2000 Adjudications)

Findings

- Female establishments account for some 12% of all fire incidents.
- Between 1999 and 2008, 46% of all cell fires occurred in local prisons (37% in male Cat B locals) and 35% in the YOI estate.
- Younger prisoners are far more likely to be involved in a fire incident than older prisoners e.g. a 15 year old is 7 times more likely to be involved in a fire incident than a 21 year old. Similarly, young people who set fires are far more likely to commit acts of violence whilst in a custodial setting.
- Fire incidents have a strong 24 hour cycle. Most incidents occur during daytime unlock but peak soon after lockup in the evening.
- 34% of fire incidents occur within the first month of a prisoner arriving at the establishment. Similarly, acts of self-harm are more likely to occur within the early days and weeks of custody.

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Are any of these issues relevant to where you work? What action may be needed to improve how you deliver safer custody to prisoners in your establishment?

! Learning point

What consideration do you give to the reasons why a prisoner starts a cell fire and do you consider opening an ACCT document to safeguard the prisoner whilst an investigation takes place?

! Learning point

Do you have effective systems in place to accurately record and share information about prisoners who have previously set fires within your establishment, in other establishments or during a previous sentence?

! Learning point

Prisoners who self-harm by fire setting should be managed under Chapter 9 of PSO 2700 'Suicide Prevention & Self Harm Management'. Paragraphs 9.3 and 9.4 provide advice on the use of enhanced case reviews & care planning respectively.

! Learning point

All cell inundation points should have a routine maintenance check at not more than 6 monthly intervals as described in PSO 5900 (Technical Order) >> Section 2 (Construction Items) >> sub section G (Maintenance of Anti-Barricade Cell Doors).

A detailed article on the risks associated with fire setting will be published in Safer Custody News over the coming months. If you have identified learning points which may assist other establishments in delivering safer custody please contact us at [scoplearning@noms.gsi.gov.uk]. Any resulting learning bulletins will be anonymous.