



# FIRE AS A WEAPON



DEFEND TODAY,  
SECURE TOMORROW

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.\*

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).



**Arsons increased**  
from 2019 to 2020



**56.9%** in cities with populations of at least 1 million.



**11.3%** in cities with populations under 10,000.

**IID incidents increased**  
from 2019 to 2020



**210%** at government facilities.



**113%** at commercial facilities.



**141%** against critical infrastructure facilities.

## NOTABLE EVENTS

- In **February 2021**, authorities arrested a man in Tomball, Texas, driving a stolen truck after finding four IIDs, described as Molotov cocktails, and bomb-making material, described as nails, in the vehicle. The suspect was charged with possession of a prohibited weapon and unauthorized use of a motor vehicle.<sup>1</sup>
- In **September 2020**, authorities arrested a man in Paris, France, for attempted murder and criminal conspiracy. The individual planned to set a satirical newspaper's offices on fire. The police found several bottles of turpentine in the subject's bag.<sup>2</sup>
- In **July 2020**, a terrorist group released a video encouraging followers to carry out arson attacks around the globe.<sup>3</sup>
- In **June 2020**, authorities arrested two people in Erie, Pennsylvania, on multiple charges, including the use of fire as a weapon to disrupt peaceful protests.<sup>4</sup>
- In **June 2020**, authorities arrested and charged an individual for allegedly having a role in setting fire to the Minneapolis, Minnesota Police Department's Third Precinct amid citywide civil unrest.<sup>5</sup>
- In **May 2020**, a subject was captured on video igniting a paper towel and placing it in the back of a police car in Seattle, Washington, amid civil disturbances. Other crowd members used accelerants to destroy the vehicle. Police took the initial subject into custody.<sup>6</sup>
- In **April 2020**, law enforcement arrested a person in Washington, D.C., for throwing a Molotov cocktail at a police car. The device exploded on impact; there were no injuries reported.<sup>7</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 entrances/exits, and elevators, as well as fire extinguishers, water supply, and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems.
- Unusual quantities or locations of flammable or combustible materials, 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 first responders and emergency medical service (EMS) personnel to develop an Emergency Action Plan.
- 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). Keep trash bins away from buildings.
- Ensure adequate lighting to monitor, surveil entire facility, and conduct inspections at regular intervals as required.
- 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 Miya Shay, "Tomball police stop stolen U-Haul truck with 'explosive-type' materials inside," KTRK, February 27, 3 2021, [msn.com/en-us/news/crime/man-driving-u-haul-with-explosives-in-tomball-has-been-charged/ar:BB1e3Bw7](https://msn.com/en-us/news/crime/man-driving-u-haul-with-explosives-in-tomball-has-been-charged/ar:BB1e3Bw7).
- 2 Aurelien Breeden, "Paris Attack Suspect Wanted to Target Charlie Hebdo with Arson," *New York Times*, September 29, 2020, [nytimes.com/2020/09/29/world/europe/france-attack-suspect-terrorism.html](https://nytimes.com/2020/09/29/world/europe/france-attack-suspect-terrorism.html).
- 3 Bridget Johnson, "ISIS Video Urges Arson as 'Five-Star' Terror Tactic, Shows California Burning," *Homeland Security Today*, August 4, 2020, [hstoday.us/subject-matter/areas/counterterrorism/isis-video-urges-arson-as-five-star-terror-tactic-shows-california-burning/](https://hstoday.us/subject-matter/areas/counterterrorism/isis-video-urges-arson-as-five-star-terror-tactic-shows-california-burning/).
- 4 Ian Cross, "FBI agents arrest 2 men in PA for role in violence, destruction in Downtown Cleveland last weekend," June 5, 2020, News 5 Cleveland, [news5cleveland.com/news/america-in-crisis/fbi-agents-arrest-2-men-in-pa-for-role-in-violence-destruction-in-downtown-cleveland-last-weekend](https://news5cleveland.com/news/america-in-crisis/fbi-agents-arrest-2-men-in-pa-for-role-in-violence-destruction-in-downtown-cleveland-last-weekend).
- 5 Morgan, Windsor, "Feds arrest man for alleged role in fire at Minneapolis Police Department precinct," ABC News, June 17, 2020, [abcnews.go.com/US/feds-arrest-man-alleged-role-fire-minneapolis-police/story?id=71292405](https://abcnews.go.com/US/feds-arrest-man-alleged-role-fire-minneapolis-police/story?id=71292405).
- 6 U.S. Department of Justice, "Seattle man charged with stealing police rifle, setting patrol car on fire during May 30 riot in downtown Seattle," October 15, 2020, [justice.gov/usao-wdwa/pr/seattle-man-charged-stealing-police-rifle-setting-patrol-car-fire-during-may-30-riot](https://justice.gov/usao-wdwa/pr/seattle-man-charged-stealing-police-rifle-setting-patrol-car-fire-during-may-30-riot).
- 7 Clarence Williams, "Man faces federal charges for allegedly throwing Molotov cocktail at D.C. police car," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2020, [washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/man-faces-federal-charges-for-allegedly-throwing-molotov-cocktail-at-dc-police-car/2020/04/25/5ba04620-870c-11ea-878a-86477a724bdb\\_story.html](https://washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/man-faces-federal-charges-for-allegedly-throwing-molotov-cocktail-at-dc-police-car/2020/04/25/5ba04620-870c-11ea-878a-86477a724bdb_story.html).