

Many Vehicular Arson Cases Difficult to Solve

By: Carole Moore

Washington, D.C.-area fire departments are grappling with hundreds of deliberately set car fires each year, according to a review by the News4 I-Team. A large number of those fires are never prosecuted, while some are never solved.

State and city fire department records and databases obtained by the I-Team show more than 200 intentionally set car fires in Virginia since 2012, including dozens in Fairfax County. State fire officials do not have information on how many of those cases were prosecuted.

A spokesman for the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, a D.C.-based association representing the insurance industry, said there have been a series of recent arson cases nationwide in which car owners deliberately torched their own vehicles in order to collect insurance payouts.

Jim Quiggle, spokesman for the Coalition Against Insurance Fraud, said the recent economic downturn could be a large factor behind the recent arson cases.

"Common sense tells you that more desperate people will take more desperate measures to get themselves out of trouble," Quiggle said.

Maryland insurance administration officials reported more than 2,000 potential cases of vehicular insurance fraud in 2013. State records, reviewed by the I-Team showed fewer than 50 cases of fraud were actually referred to prosecutors. A state spokeswoman said arson cases are often challenging to prove in court.

"Most of the time we can find the origin and the cause," Prince George's County Deputy Fire Chief Benjamin Barksdale said. "The hard part is finding out who did it."

Prince George's County fire investigators and Maryland State Fire Marshal's Office investigators are trained to find small clues, some of which are often hidden inside the damaged vehicles, to detect arson cases, investigators said.

In April, Prince George's County authorities charged Washington, D.C., firefighter Marcus Jackson with arson for allegedly setting fire to his vehicle. Jackson initially told police he parked his car at the corner of Georgia Avenue and Van Buren Street NW around 10:30 p.m. and said his car was missing when he woke up the next morning. He told police he was in possession of the two keys to the car.

Jackson's phone records showed he was in the area of Farmingdale Avenue just minutes before crews responded to the car fire Jan. 23. In a follow-up interview with police, Jackson admitted soaking the inside of his

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car with gasoline, then using a match to set it on fire. According to charging documents, Jackson said the car had a "lot of mechanical problems and he was looking for a quick fix to get some extra money."

In a separate arson case in 2013, in which nine vehicles owned by the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission were burned by a car thief suspected of trying to destroy evidence of the crime, no suspects were found. Police report, as of July 2014, there are no leads in the case.

D.C. insurance officials reported a rise in automobile insurance fraud cases. They investigated 190 such cases in 2012. In 2013, there were 238 cases, according to records obtained by the News4 I-Team.