

United States Bomb Data Center
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United States Bomb Data Center

(U) House of Worship Report – Calendar Years 2011 through 2015

USBDC Advisory



USBDC Advisory 16-04

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Executive Summary

(U//LES) This report serves to present information and analysis associated with fire, arson, and bombing incidents at houses of worship (HOWs)¹ occurring within the United States for the past 5 years, between January 2011 through December 2015, and reported to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). In total, there were 733 fire and explosion related incidents, per ATF reporting, for all 50 States. The information contained herein does not represent all fire, arson and bombing incidents for the United States. This report only represents those incidents that have been reported to and investigated by ATF.

Key Findings

- (U//LES) A total of 733 house-of-worship incidents were reported and investigated by ATF.
- (U//LES) There is no evidence of a nationwide racial conspiracy associated with houses of worship.
- (U//LES) There were 172 incidents reported for calendar year (CY) 2015, a significant increase compared to the prior 4 years; from CYs 2011 through 2014, the number of incidents ranged between 127 and 147.
- (U//LES) Incendiary fires have slightly increased since calendar year 2011.
- (U//LES) The number of incidents reported within a month averaged between 12 and 14, with January and July being the highest for the year.
- (U//LES) Of the reported cases, 496 were closed (147 for accidentals fires, 166 for incendiary fires, and 172 for undetermined fires). In addition, 99 cases identified a person of interest or an arrest.

Background

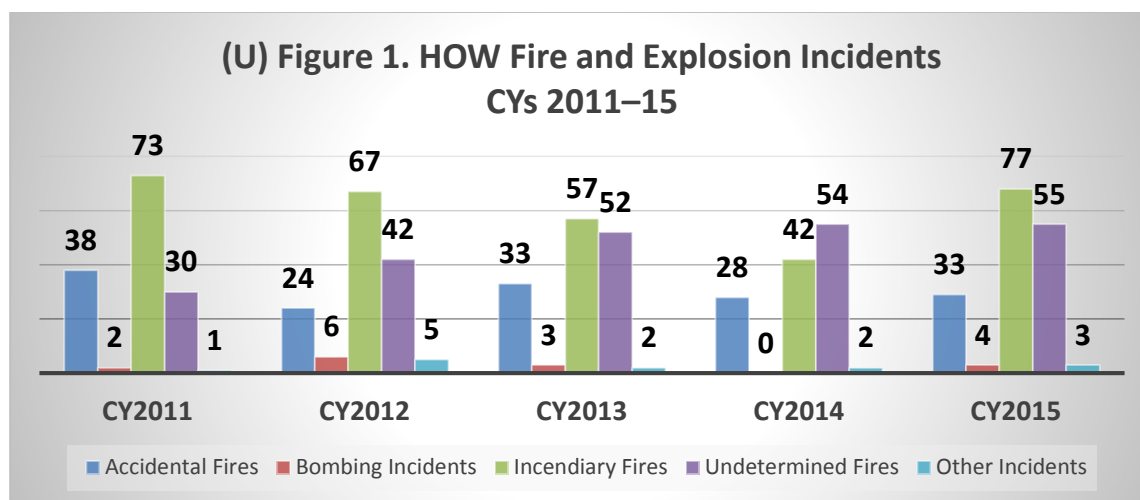
(U) On July 3, 1996, the Church Arson Prevention Act² was enacted into Federal law, and the National Church Arson Task Force (NCATF) was formed at the direction of President Bill Clinton to address concerns over the possibility of a nationwide racially-based motive associated with fire and explosives incidents at houses of worship. ATF was designated to investigate the origin and cause of all fire and explosives incidents at houses of worship. ATF continues to respond to house of worship (HOW) fire and explosives incidents and serve as a repository for data pertaining to all of these incidents.

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Information and Analysis

(U//LES) For the past 5 years, ATF reported 733 fire and explosion related incidents associated with houses of worship. Of those incidents, 156 were determined to be accidental, 15 were bombings, 316 were incendiary fires, and 233 were undetermined fires; “other” incidents totaled 13, for (attempted arson, threats, and recovery of an incendiary device).³⁴ In addition, ATF reported 16 persons injured and 6 persons killed within the past 5 years.

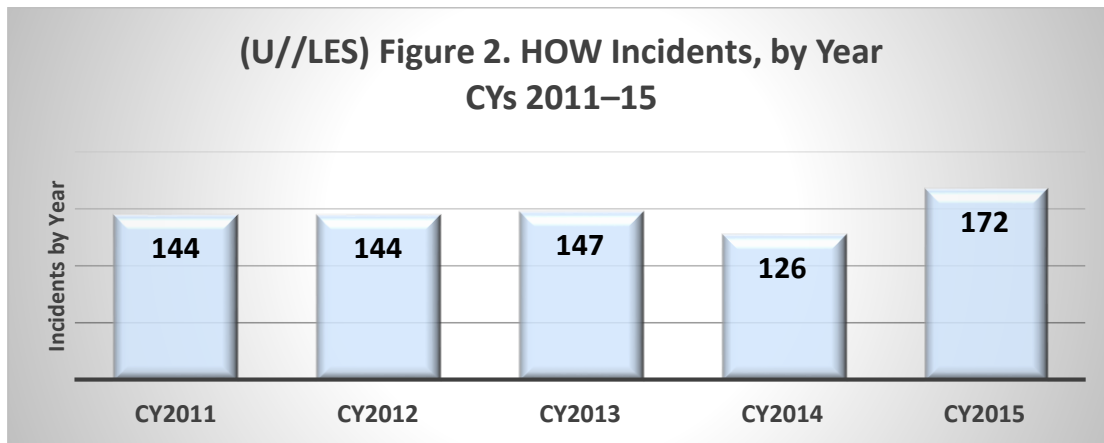
(U//LES) Figure 1 illustrates all categories of HOW incidents for the past 5 years. All incidents appear to be on average with the exception of incendiary and undetermined fires. Both of these incident types tend to have similar numbers each year; however, the numbers have increased within CY 2015.



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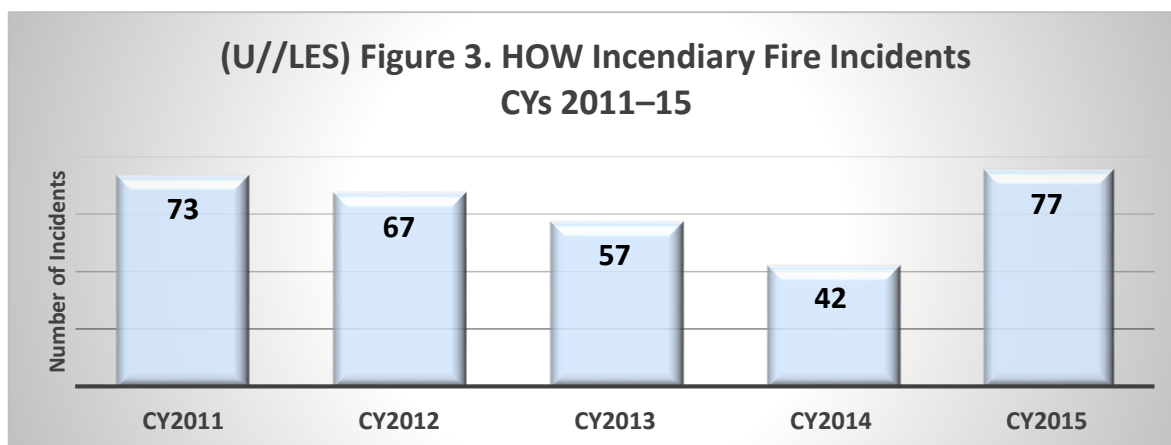
(U//LES) Figure 2 illustrates the total number of incidents reported by calendar years 2011 through 2015. The number of incidents has been on average with the exception of 2014 (126 incidents), a low reporting year; however, 2015 reported the highest number of incidents for the past 4 years, reaching 172. Per ATF reporting in 2015, the following list a sequence of events for the year:

- In January 2015, the State of Tennessee reported incidents at three churches 6 miles apart.
- In June 2015, a shooting occurred in South Carolina. (*NOTE: With regards to the substantial increase of incendiary incidents for CY 2015, ATF cannot confirm or refute the shooting may have contribute to the surge of church fires and explosions starting from July through December 2015.*)
- In July and August 2015, ATF reported 34 incidents in total that occurred within 24 States to include several bombing incidents in New Mexico.
- In October 2015, ATF reported 21 incidents, the largest number reported within a month. In addition, a serial arsonist targeted several churches in Missouri.
- In November 2015, three churches were targeted in Mississippi in which a cloth was placed at the entrance of the church and set on fire.
- In December 2015, one church in Delaware was targeted twice, which led to a total loss.

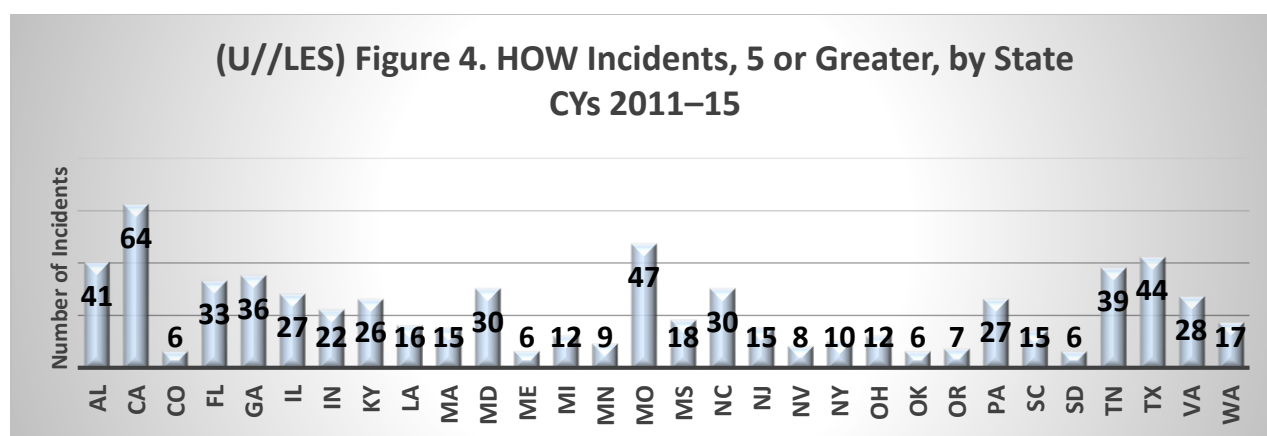


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(U//LES) Figure 3 illustrates a slight increase in incendiary fires. Of the 77 incendiary fires, ATF reported that the vast majority were initiated with open flames to ordinary combustible materials. Also, in some cases an ignitable liquid was used to set the fires.

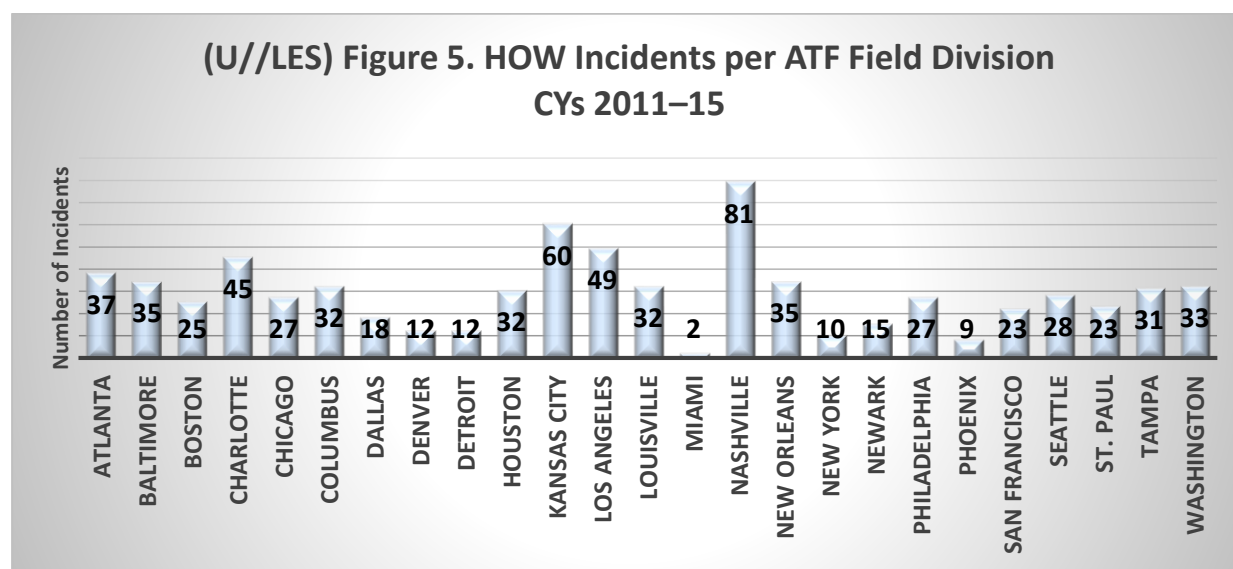


(U//LES) Figure 4 illustrates the number of incidents by State. Most States reporting the highest number of incidents were in the South; California is the only exception (most likely due to its extensive geographic size and comparably large population).⁵ ATF reported seven (7) significant incidents for the State of Missouri, where one suspect was apprehended and charged with arson.

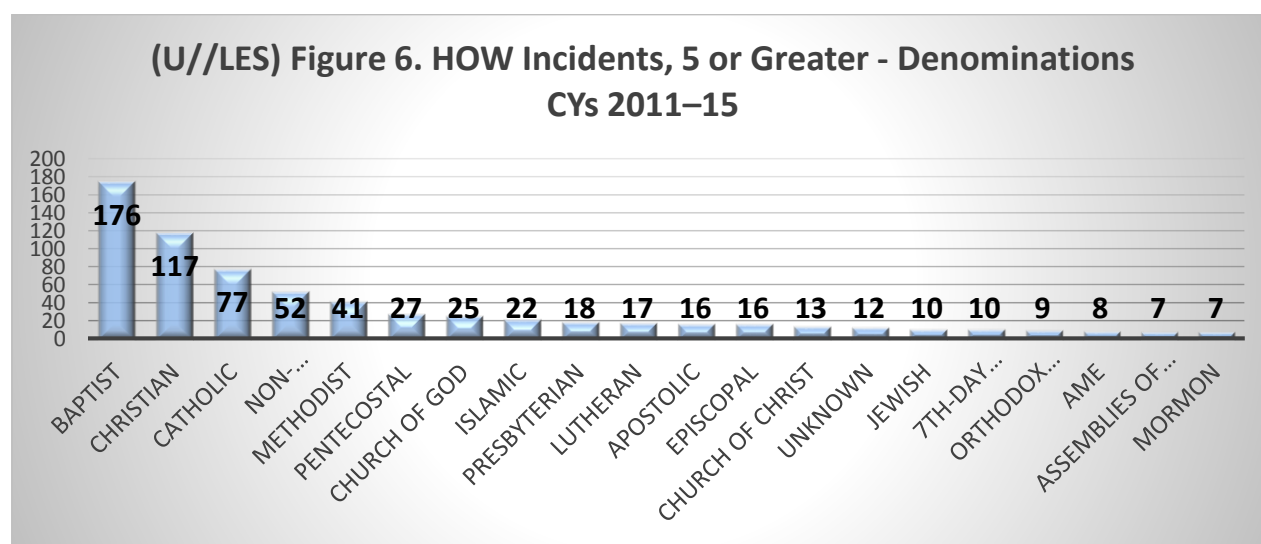


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(U//LES) Figure 5 illustrates the number of incidents reported by ATF field division. Nashville Field Division listed 81 incidents for the States of Alabama (41 incidents) and Tennessee (39 incidents). Kansas City Field Division listed 60 incidents, the majority of the fires occurring in the Eastern and Western District of Missouri (46 incidents).

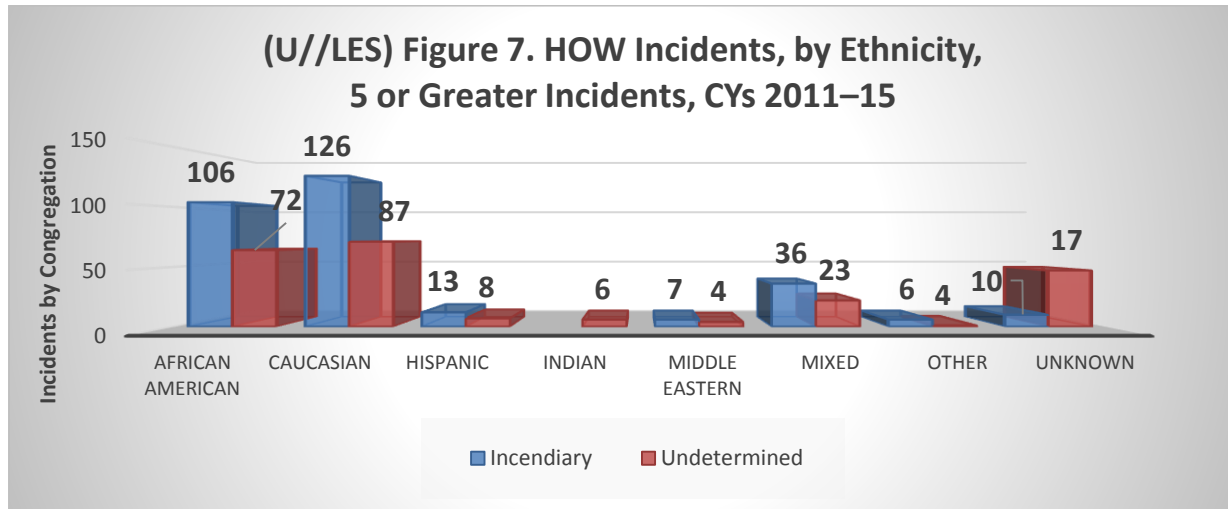


(U//LES) Figure 6 illustrates the number of reported incidents involving the place of worship's denomination. The largest number of incidents occurred at Baptist, Catholic, Christian, and non-denominational churches, reflective of the past 5 years. Of the 176 incidents reported for Baptist churches, 20 occurred in Alabama and 15 in Tennessee.

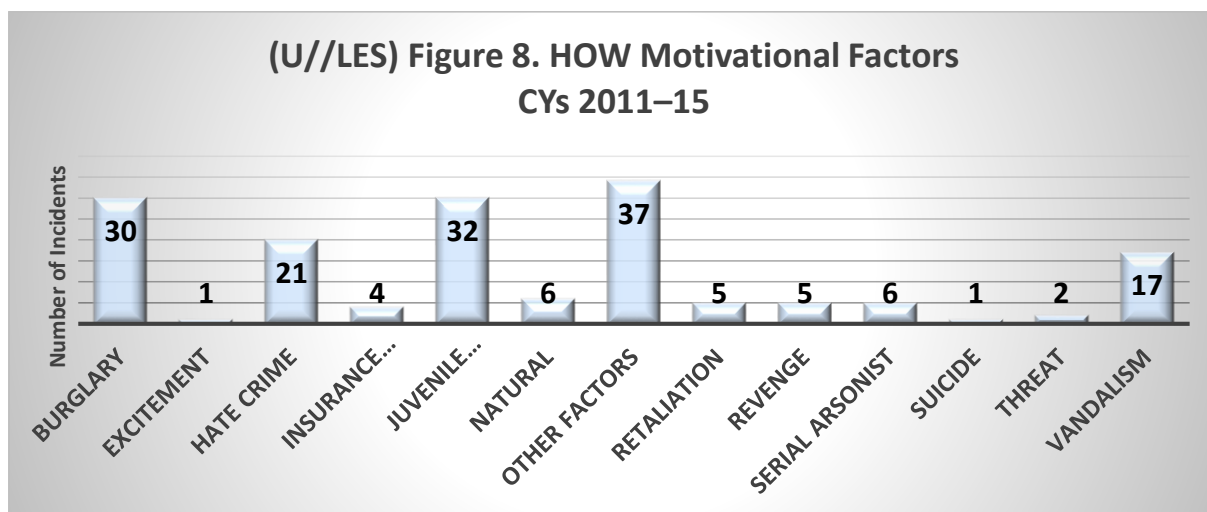


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(U//LES) Figure 7 illustrates the number of incidents that identified the ethnicity or congregation associated with a church. Of the 733 incidents reported by congregation, Caucasian (267 incidents) reported the highest followed by African-American (222 incidents). In reviewing only the incendiary and undetermined fires by congregation, Caucasian continues to lead as the highest for the past 5 years.

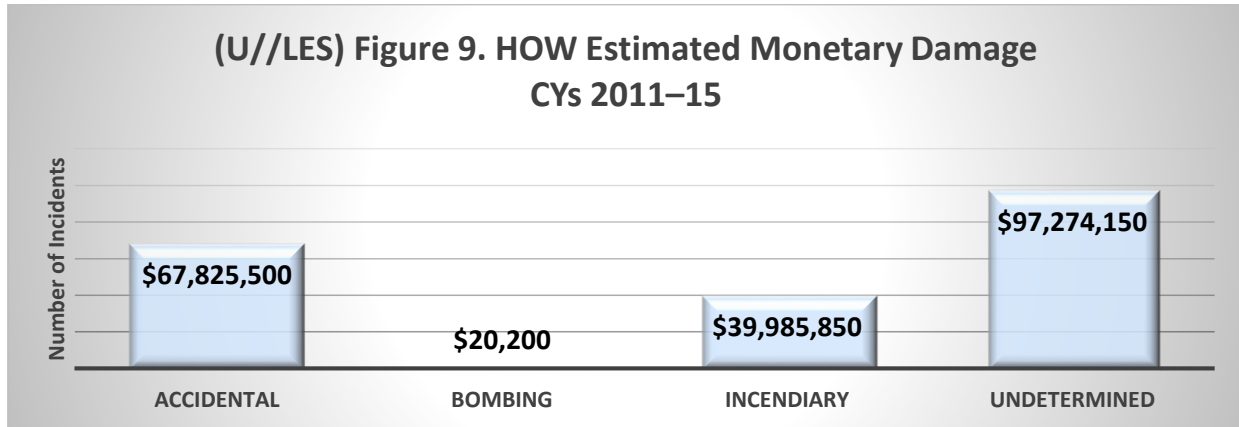


(U//LES) Figure 8 illustrates the number of motivational factors of those incidents that identified a motive in the case. Of the 733 incidents, 167 identified some type of motivational factor that led to the cause of the fire or bombing of the church. In addition, 32 incidents identified juvenile involvement, where a fire was set by the juvenile to conceal a burglary or for boredom and/or excitement. Other factors related to incidents involved fires due to drug offenses, persons with mental health issues, as well as threats. *NOTE: The leading cause for accidental fires contribute to to electrical malfunctions and/or kitchen fires.*

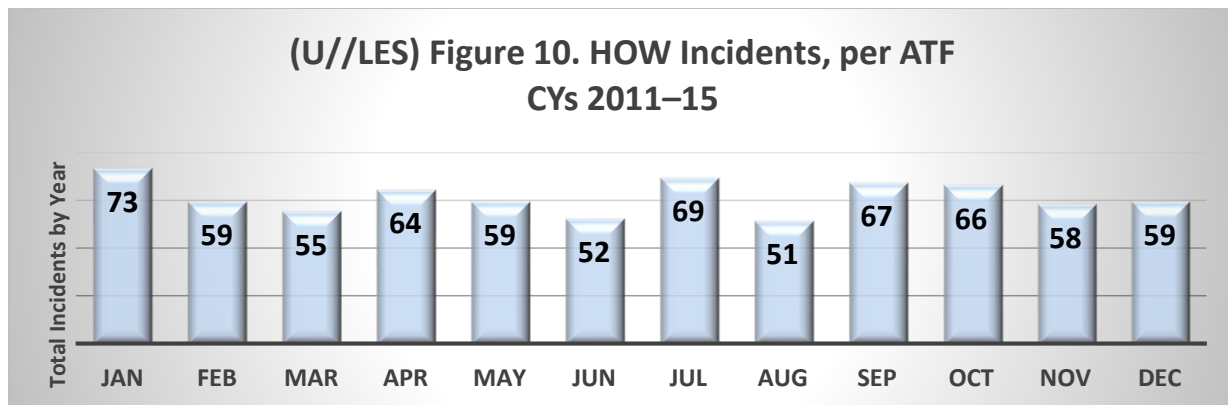


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(U//LES) Figure 9 illustrates the estimated dollar damages, per ATF reporting. The total estimated monetary damage for all house-of-worship incidents was more than \$2.5 million. Estimated damages from incendiary fires and bombings were more than \$39 million. In 2015, two undetermined fires occurred in Knoxville, Tennessee: St. George Creek Orthodox Church (damages = \$2.6–3.2 million) and Texas Valley Baptist Church (damages = \$1 million). Both cases are currently open pending investigation.

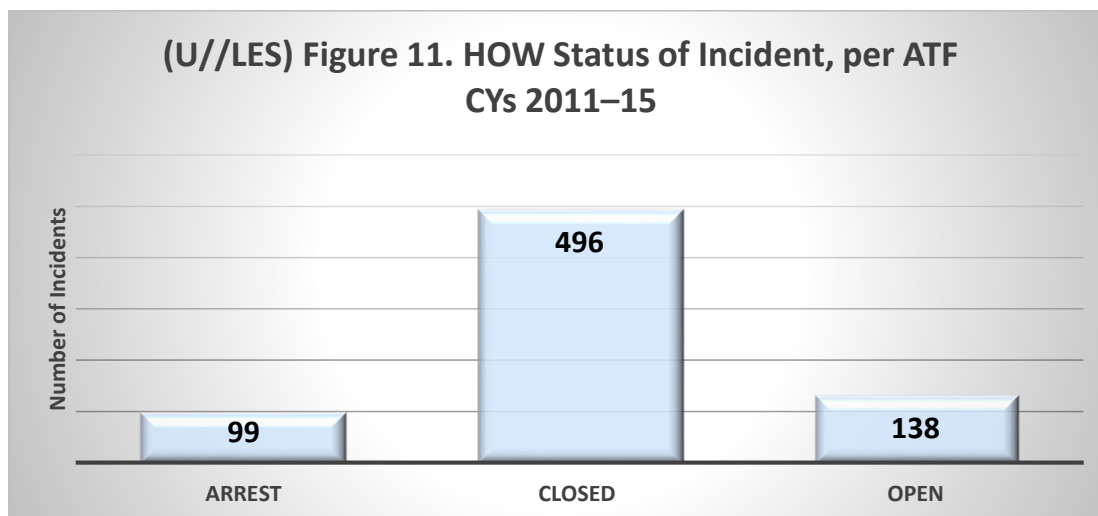


(U//LES) Figure 10 illustrates the number of incidents occurring within a month. The average number of incidents reported within a month range between 12 and 14. Based on ATF reporting, the months of January (73 incidents) and July (69 incidents) rank the highest involving arson, bombings, and other criminal activity occurring at a house of worship.



(U//LES) Figure 11 illustrates the status of all house-of-worship incidents in calendar years 2011 through 2015. Of the 733 HOW incidents reported by ATF, 68 percent are closed, 14 percent identified an arrest or person of interest, and 20 percent are open pending investigation. In addition, 8 cases were prosecuted for Federal violations and 38 were prosecuted on State charges. In reviewing the closed cases, 147 for accidental fires, 166 for incendiary fires, and 172 for undetermined fires.

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Conclusion

(U//LES) For calendar year 2015, 172 incidents were reported per ATF, which showed a slight increase compared to the past 4 years. In comparison to the overall number of incidents for calendar years 2011, through 2014, the numbers of reported incidents were relatively low.

(U) Therefore, in accordance with ATF policy, ATF agents will continue to respond to and fully investigate every reported fire at a house of worship nationwide. Similarly, ATF will continue to monitor and collect this reporting and provide a monthly report to the Department of Justice (DOJ), Civil Rights Division.

Reference

(U//LES) If more information is needed relating to this report, please call the ATF Joint Support and Operations Center at (800) 800-3855. Comments can also be directed to Intelligence Research Specialist Carmen Simms at (202) 648-8612.

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Appendix

(U) Since the operation of the NCATF, ATF has been monitoring HOW incidents and reporting information to the Department of Justice (DOJ), Civil Rights Division. The following is a brief synopsis involving house-of-worship investigations and their status reported by ATF and disseminated to DOJ over the past 5-year period:⁶

Calendar Year 2011

- (U//LES) In calendar year 2011, there were 144 fire and explosions incidents reported by ATF. Of those incidents, 73 were incendiary fires and 2 were bombings. Many fires related to church burglaries involved juveniles. California and Texas were listed as the States with a significant number of incidents. Dollar damages estimated at more than \$29 million. Of the 144 incidents, 18 suspects were prosecuted, 123 cases were closed, and 3 cases are open pending investigation.

SIGNIFICANT CASE: Los, Angeles, California – In April 2011, there was an incendiary fire with significant dollar loss. The incident occurred at Saint John Catholic Vianney Catholic Church. Damages estimated at more than \$3 million. A suspect was identified and arrested for *arson, burglary, and possession of an incendiary device*. The suspect was sentenced to 18 years in State prison.

Calendar Year 2012

- (U//LES) In calendar year 2012, there were 144 fire and explosions incidents reported by ATF. Of those, 67 were incendiary fires and 6 were bombings. Burglary was identified as the motivating factor for those incidents involving juveniles; however, several incidents were identified as hate crimes and involved vandalism, derogatory messages, graffiti, and swastika images. California and North Carolina were identified as the two States with a substantial number of HOW incidents. Dollar damages estimated at more than \$35 million. Of the 144 incidents, 26 suspects were arrested, 111 cases were closed, and 7 cases are open pending investigation.

SIGNIFICANT CASE: San Diego, California – In December 2011 and January 2012, several fires occurred at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. Officials observed graffiti and derogatory markings on the walls and doors of the churches. Damages estimated for all incidents totaled more than \$200,000. There were no arrests, and all cases were closed in 2013.

Calendar Year 2013

- (U//LES) In calendar year 2013, there were 147 fire and explosions incidents reported by ATF. Of those, 57 were incendiary fires and 3 were bombings. Alabama was listed as the State with a substantial number of HOW incidents. Upon review, Alabama's total was 17 incidents; however, there were no reports to indicate a possible threat. Dollar damages estimated at more than \$79

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million. Of the 147 incidents, 22 suspects were arrested, 115 cases were closed, and 10 cases are open pending investigation.

SIGNIFICANT CASE: West Milford, New Jersey – On May 7 and 16, 2013, two fires occurred at the Holy Faith Lutheran Church. Unknown subject(s) set fires inside and outside the church. Investigative leads are continuing to be developed. Both cases were closed by the ATF Newark Field Division.

Calendar Year 2014

- (U//LES) In calendar year 2014, there were 126 fire and explosions incidents reported by ATF. Of those, 42 incidents were incendiary fires. No bombings were reported. Motives associated with these incidents include burglary, some of which involved juveniles. Missouri and Georgia were identified as having a significant number of HOW incidents. Dollar damages estimated at more than \$20 million. Of the 126 incidents, 16 suspects were arrested, 93 cases were closed, and 18 cases are open pending investigation.

SIGNIFICANT CASE: Dawsonville, Georgia – In December 2014, two incendiary fires occurred at the Gospel Baptist Way Church. The suspect was arrested on State arson charges.

SIGNIFICANT CASE: Felton, Delaware – In December 2014, three incendiary fires occurred at Manship Chapel Church, Healing Hands Church, and Law Mennonite Church. All religious facilities were set on fire at different hours of the day. ATF arrested two suspects who confessed to burglarizing then setting fires to the churches. Both suspects were convicted and found guilty of State arson charges.

Calendar Year 2015

- (U//LES) In calendar year 2015, there were 172 fire and explosions incidents reported by ATF. Of those, 77 incidents were incendiary fires and 4 were bombings. The States with significant incidents were Tennessee and Missouri. Status of cases: 17 suspects were arrested, 54 cases were closed, and 101 cases are open pending investigation.

SIGNIFICANT CASE: From October 8 to October 22, 2015, a series of related arson fires occurred at **seven (7)** different Christian denominational churches in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. All incidents had similar modus operandi (MO), where a small incendiary fire occurred on the exterior of the church, resulting in minor damages less than \$5,000. On October 30, 2015, one suspect was arrested and charged in the Circuit Court of St. Louis with *arson 2nd degree* for setting two church fires. This case is currently being investigated by ATF Kansas City Field Division to perfect Federal and State arson violations.

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Notes

¹ House of Worship includes the area of worship and religious-affiliated property such as rectory, office, or school; it also includes private property such as vehicles owned by persons working or attending a service.

² Title 18, U.S.C. Section 247.

³ Other Fire Incidents are cases reported by ATF associated with attempted fires, recovery, and threats.

⁴ BATS User Manual: Incendiary Device – any firebomb, and any device designed or specially adapted to cause physical harm to person or property by means of fire, and consisting of an incendiary substance and a means to ignite it.

⁵ ATF *NCATF Reporting on Houses of Worship*, briefing paper, dated August 18, 2015.

⁶ ATF does not track the outcome of all HOW incendiary or bombing incidents. ATF provides technical assistance at fire scenes or the investigation may be closed or turned over to the State and local law enforcement for further investigation.