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“Since I went to the conference… I have really thought just how bad lighting fires are.”

Diversionary conferencing for youth misuse of fire.

Abstract
Youth misuse of fire presents a significant risk to life and property. In Australia, the tertiary prevention of youth misuse of fire involves firefighter participation in diversionary conferencing convened for young people who commit fire-related offences. This approach assumes that young people misuse fire due to a lack of awareness of the consequences, and that education delivered by firefighters in the context of conferencing reduces the risk of future misuse of fire. To explore the validity of this assumption, content analysis of apology letters derived from diversionary conferences convened for young people who committed fire-related offences in New South Wales and Tasmania was conducted. Findings suggest that diversionary conferencing with firefighter involvement has the potential to target misuse of fire which manifests from a lack of awareness of the consequences, and that the provision of education has the potential to reduce such misuse of fire by young people.

Keywords
Arson, diversionary conferencing, firefighters, juvenile, youth misuse of fire.

Introduction
Youth misuse of fire (YMF) refers to any illegitimate use of fire or incendiary materials by a person under the age of 18 years (Pooley & Ferguson, 2015). Illegitimate use of fire by young people is recognised around the world as a multifaceted, complex, and dangerous phenomenon (Martin et al, 2004). In response to this problem, fire services have placed increasing emphasis on the provision of mechanisms to facilitate YMF prevention (Haines et
al, 2006). In Australia, one such mechanism involves firefighter participation in diversionary conferencing convened for young people who commit fire-related offences. The efficacy of this approach relies upon the assumption that young people misuse fire due to a lack of awareness of the consequences, and that education delivered by firefighters in the context of conferencing targets this risk factor. The aim of this study was to empirically determine the validity of this assumption. First, the scope of the YMF problem in Australia is presented, followed by an overview of YMF prevention programs provided by fire services within Australia. Diversionary conferencing for YMF is presented as a tertiary prevention program. The assumption underpinning the perceived efficacy of this approach is discussed, followed by an outline of the method employed to conduct an analysis of this assumption. The proceeding results and discussion reveal that conferencing for YMF offers an appropriate avenue through which to target young people who engage in YMF due to a lack of awareness of the consequences.

**Youth misuse of fire**

Existing statistics provide some insight into the scope of the YMF problem within Australia. The Australian Institute of Criminology (2005) estimated that young people account for approximately three quarters of deliberately lit fires. A New South Wales (NSW) based study revealed that, between 2001 and 2006, 23.4% of all arson defendants were under the age of 17 years (Muller, 2008). Although Muller’s (2008) arson statistics reflect an over-representation of young people in offending generally, the research only considered YMF in its criminalised form. Relying on official rates of arson is problematic because identification and conviction rates are estimated at four in 1,000, the lowest of any crime in almost every jurisdiction (Tomison, 2010). Bryant (2008) investigated 280,000 vegetation fires attended by 18 fire agencies throughout Australia over a five-year period and found that 24% were
attributed to young people. While these findings are significant, Bryant’s study investigated vegetation fires only and excluded all non-vegetation fires as well as fires deemed suspicious. Pooley and Ferguson (2015) conducted a study of all fires attributed to young people as recorded by Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) and the NSW Rural Fire Service (NSWRFS). Findings revealed that, between 1 July 2004 and 31 June 2014, FRNSW and NSWRFS collectively responded to 419,736 fires, 26,380 (6.3%) of which were attributed to YMF. This figure is also likely to be an under-representation because fire services differentiated YMF from incendiary and suspicious fires despite the possibility these fires may also have been caused by a young person. Nevertheless, of the 26,380 cases of YMF identified, only 55.6% were vegetation fires (Pooley & Ferguson, 2015). The remaining 54.4% were rubbish, recreational, furniture/wares, apparel/linen, structural, and other fires (Pooley & Ferguson, 2015).

These figures are concerning in light of evidence which supports a dark figure of YMF. Tomison (2010) stated that fires are only reported when they cause personal or property damage. Bryant and Willis (2006) theorised that when fires are reported and categorised as ‘cause unknown’ they are likely to be the product of YMF. Corcoran et al (2007) declared that fires which occur indoors are reported less often than fires which occur outdoors, while Lowenstein (2003) found that half of all indoor fires occur as a result of YMF. YMF is therefore conceivably more problematic than existing literature portrays.

**YMF prevention**

A lack of reliable evidence for the scope of YMF has hampered efforts to predict the incidence of the behaviour and those who engage in it. Reduction of YMF therefore relies heavily on preventative initiatives. In Australia, Canada, New Zealand (NZ), the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US), fire services have placed increasing emphasis on
the provision of mechanisms to facilitate YMF prevention (Haines et al, 2006). Despite taking some ownership over YMF prevention, fire services are limited in the way they manage the problem (Tasmania Department of Justice, 2011). This is because fire services have the capacity to facilitate the prevention of YMF which manifests from a lack of fire education and/or poor fire safety skills, not that which co-occurs with more complex behavioural problems. Bound by this capacity, fire services target YMF which manifests from normal developmental fire interest coupled with a lack of education and/or skill to manage this interest. Fire services within Australia prevent such normal developmental YMF through the implementation of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention programs.

Primary prevention

Primary prevention aims to avoid an undesirable event by reducing the likelihood of it occurring in the first place (McKenzie & Seabert, 2008). Fire education provided in schools is a form of primary prevention as it aims to reduce the likelihood of YMF occurring within the youth population. Fire education sessions are run by local firefighters in most jurisdictions in Australia. Existing literature suggests that fire education plays a pivotal role in fire prevention and preparedness where programs run in schools have been found to improve fire knowledge and skills in young people (Huseyin & Satyen, 2006).

Secondary prevention

Secondary prevention refers to early detection and treatment to reduce the likelihood of an undesirable event manifesting into a more severe, advanced form (McKenzie & Seabert, 2008). Secondary prevention of YMF was first implemented in Australia in 1988 in response to high numbers of fires lit by young people and, subsequently, a high number of burns unit admissions (McDonald, 2010). The Juvenile Fire Awareness and Intervention Program was
developed by the Victorian Metropolitan Fire Brigade in consultation with the Royal Children’s Hospital Mental Health Unit, Melbourne (McDonald, 2010). This program provided the impetus and foundation upon which YMF secondary prevention programs were implemented within all other Australian jurisdictions. There are currently seven YMF secondary prevention programs available within Australia, operated by each jurisdiction’s fire service. These programs have been evaluated and found effective in changing fire-specific behaviours in young people and their parents/guardians (McDonald, 2010).

Tertiary prevention
Tertiary prevention is implemented after an undesirable event has occurred, and aims to re-educate and rehabilitate to avoid reoccurrence of the event (McKenzie & Seabert, 2008). Tertiary prevention of YMF refers to juvenile justice system intervention which is fire-specific. Here, young people who are apprehended and admit guilt for a fire-related offence can be referred to diversionary conferencing convened with firefighter involvement.

Diversionary conferencing is a juvenile justice mechanism which acts as an alternative to court proceedings for young people who have committed an offence. Based on the philosophy of restorative justice, diversionary conferencing acts as ‘a process whereby all the parties with a stake in a particular offence come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 37). Diversionary conferencing for YMF is yet to attract theoretical or empirical investigation.

Diversionary conferencing for YMF
Diversionary conferencing for YMF falls within the jurisdictions of juvenile justice and fire services. In NSW, the tertiary prevention of YMF is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding between FRNSW and Juvenile Justice NSW (MoU, 2011). In Tasmania, the
program is governed by a protocol which provides the framework for collaboration between Tasmania Fire Service and Youth Justice Services Tasmania (Youth Justice Services Tasmania, 2008). The objectives of these interagency agreements are to: facilitate firefighter involvement in conferences convened for young people who commit fire-related offences; advance fire knowledge in young people through the provision of fire education; improve fire-safety skills in young people through the undertaking of fire-specific outcome plan tasks; reduce the likelihood of fire-related recidivism; and increase community safety (MoU, 2011; Tasmania Fire Service, 2008). The interagency agreements theorise that enhanced community safety will result from fire-related behavioural change which will manifest when young people engage with a firefighter and receive information about the actual and potential consequences of their YMF (JFLIP Conference, 2007; MoU, 2011). The tertiary prevention mechanism operating in diversionary conferencing for YMF is education which informs young people about the consequences of misusing fire.

**Fire education**

Existing literature indicates that by targeting and reducing risk factors uniquely correlated with fire-related behaviour, misuse of fire may be prevented (Diekman et al, 2011). In fact, fire-specific risk factors have been deemed the most valid and reliable measure through which to evaluate YMF prevention programs (Mackay et al, 2006). A lack of fire education has been recognised within existing literature as a fire-specific risk factor (Sharp et al, 2006). Fire education is a broad term which has been employed within existing literature to refer to educational programs delivered to young people which enhance understanding of all or any of the following: the science of fire (the fire triangle), the nature of fire (what burns and how fast), the consequences of misusing fire, how to protect oneself from fire, and how to prevent fires from occurring (Haines et al, 2006; McDonald, 2010; Satyen et al, 2004).
The main objective of diversionary conferencing for YMF is to provide education which informs young people about the consequences of misusing fire. The efficacy of the program rests upon the assumption that YMF manifests from a lack of awareness of the consequences. Existing literature provides some evidence to support this notion. Ducat and Ogloff (2011) conducted a review of international fire education programs. The Australian researchers concluded that education on the consequences of YMF was among the elements found to contribute to programs that have an impact on misuse of fire recidivism (Ducat & Ogloff, 2011). Haines et al (2006) conducted a study of YMF intervention services in NZ, Australia, the UK, US, and Canada. The NZ based researchers found that many of the program practitioners involved in the study believed that young people did not consider the consequences of their actions or did not fully understand them prior to participating in YMF (Haines et al, 2006). These findings indicate that the provision of information about the consequences of misusing fire has the potential to reduce YMF when the behaviour manifests from of a lack of awareness. However, such education does not always reduce YMF recidivism (McDonald, 2010). In fact, information about the consequences of fire has the potential to increase YMF when the behaviour is intentional.

Although education which informs young people about the consequences of misusing fire may reduce YMF recidivism when the behaviour manifests from a lack of such education, YMF may also manifest from a desire to bring about such consequences. Despite this, the efficacy of conferencing for YMF relies upon the assumption that YMF is the product of a lack of awareness of the consequences, and that education which provides information on the actual and potential consequences of misusing fire is required to reduce the risk of recidivism. However, there is no available evidence to support this proposition.

Method
To partially fill this void, content analysis of apology letters derived from diversionary conferences convened for young people who committed fire-related offences in NSW and Tasmania was conducted. The writing of an apology letter is one of a number of outcome plan tasks which may be undertaken by a young person who participates in conferencing in NSW and Tasmania (s52 Young Offenders Act 1997 (NSW); s16 Youth Justice Act 1997(Tas)). Young people are not provided with guidelines or a script to specify what they should include within an apology letter. However, those monitoring the completion of an apology letter may suggest that a young person include specific content such as the circumstances which led to their offence, their experience of the conference, what was learnt from the process, and what they would like to achieve (Juvenile Justice New South Wales, 2016; Youth Justice Services Tasmania, 2008). Nevertheless, apology letters have been used by researchers to investigate how individuals conceptualise themselves in the context of their offending, and to identify individuals’ criminogenic needs (Duff, 2010). Analysis of apology letter content was thus deemed a suitable means through which to explore the reasons young people attributed to their YMF, and how young people experienced, interpreted, and reacted to the fire safety messages delivered to them by firefighters in the context of conferencing.

Sample

The sample included de-identified apology letters written by young people who participated in a diversionary conference for a fire-related offence between 1 July 2006 and 31 June 2016. Letters were derived from records maintained by Juvenile Justice NSW and Tasmania Fire Service. The sample size was small (n = 23) because copies of apology letters written by young people are generally destroyed upon receipt to protect the young person’s identity. Only those apology letters which were de-identified and securely stored were retrievable for analysis.
**Procedure**

Apology letters were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo, version 11. Content analysis, an unobtrusive research method which involves the systematic categorisation of qualitative data (Julien, 2008), was conducted. The qualitative inquiry involved relational analysis, utilised to identity patterns of, and relationships between, concepts (Kedar & Shewale, 2015).

**Results**

Content analysis revealed five concepts: the reasons young people attributed to their YMF; the fire safety messages cognised; degree of responsibility; expressions of apology; and proclamations of behavioural change. All quotes listed under each concept are exact replications of the words, grammar and punctuation used by young people, however spelling has been corrected to aid comprehension.

**Reasoning.**

Twenty apology letters contained at least one reason young people attributed to their misuse of fire.

Lack of awareness of the consequences of misusing fire. Sixteen young people attributed their misuse of fire to a lack of awareness of the consequences. Young people wrote, “If I had known what the consequences had been, I would not have lit it in the first place…” and “Honestly, I had no idea of how dangerous fire was… I wish I hadn’t made such a stupid mistake as to play with fire. I didn’t realise how badly it could affect someone.”

Enjoyment. Three young people referred to a sense of enjoyment when discussing their misuse of fire: “I do like fire and I always play with it....” and “I now have realised that fires are not as much fun as I thought they were…”
Accidental. Two young people included accounts which attributed their misuse of fire to an accident: “It was a stupid accident…” and “I don’t like to think about the day my friend and I accidentally started a fire.”

Intoxication. Two young people attributed their misuse of fire to intoxication: “I have recently been to a community conference because … me and my mate were drinking … and we decided to do something we shouldn’t have done, and that was set the sand dunes alight.”

Boredom. One young person attributed misuse of fire to boredom: “To be honest, we were bored and I suppose felt we’d get a kick out of it.”

Helping Others. One young person attributed their YMF to helping others; “I done the bush because there was snakes seen there and there is children living in the units and I was thinking of their safety.”

Peer Pressure. One young person wrote, “If I could do things to make things better, I could stop hanging around with the trouble making friends…”, indicating that this person attributed their behaviour to peer group association.

Lessons learned.

All apology letters contained at least one lesson learned.

Impact on others. Fourteen letters referred to a realisation that misuse of fire had a significant impact on others: “I realise that it affected the community with the smoke and everyone that was near the fire…” and “I have now realised that we done the wrong thing that night, and also what we done not only affected us… it has also affected our families, the police, the fire department, and the neighbouring community, such as the elderly, schools, families, morning walkers, and anyone else that goes to [beach].”

Risk to life. Twelve young people referred to the potential risk to life their misuse of fire may have caused: “It could have killed people walking through the [town] reserve or it
could have made its way to the houses nearby and burnt them down and killed the people inside…” and “A fire could mean death to the people attending the fire. And health problems later on in life, both mentally and physically, because of the things they see like people being burnt, death, plus burnt animals.”

Risk to property. Eleven young people wrote about the potential damage to property and bushland which may have resulted from their YMF: “I have learnt my lesson and have realised the damage that could have been caused if it had spread more than it did…” and “I now know that my stupid behaviour that day led to a very dangerous situation and could have taken houses and even more bushland than it did…”.

Dangerous behaviour. Eleven young people wrote about the dangers associated with YMF. Comments included: “I know and understand the dangers of playing with fire and how quickly things can get out of hand…” and “The upside of this has been learning about how quickly fires escalate and how dangerous they can be.”

Tying up fire service resources. Ten apology letters included the realisation that YMF tied up fire service resources. References included: “I am sorry because I made the fire brigade waste time when they could have been helping people in need…” and “I am sorry because the resources used in that fire could have been needed elsewhere like [town/town] to either extinguish a house or car fire.”

Costly behaviour. Finally, three young people referred to the monetary cost associated with their behaviour; “I have learned through these rough few weeks that this equipment was worth a lot of money…” and “I also realise that if the building had caught fire then people would lose their jobs and the [business] had lost lots of money because things would have been burnt in the fire.”

**Responsibilisation.**
All apology letters referred to the acceptance or mitigation of responsibility.

Full responsibility. By directly referring to their actions and the consequences which resulted, 17 young people accepted full responsibility for their behaviour. Young people wrote: “I have no excuse for my stupidity that night...” and “Lighting the fire was my idea and now I know it was a stupid idea.”

Mitigated responsibility. Six young people mitigated their responsibility by providing reasons for their misuse of fire which reduced their culpability. Two young people wrote that their misuse of fire was accidental. Two wrote that they misused fire due to intoxication and impaired decision making. One young person attributed their misuse use of fire to peer group association, and one young person attributed their behaviour to helping others.

Apology.
Twenty-two apology letters included a direct apology and/or an expression of remorse.

Direct apologies. Twenty-two apology letters included direct apologies, expressed in a number of ways including, “I would like to apologise for my involvement in the incident…”, “I am very sorry…” and “Please accept my apology.”

Expressions of remorse. Eleven young people used their apology letters to express remorse for their behaviour. These expressions of remorse varied from expressions of regret, “If I could of done things different I would.”; direct expressions of remorse, “I felt a feeling of remorse and regret of being involved in such a silly act…”; expressions of disappointment, “I got nothing besides disappointment, embarrassment and self-pity.”; loss of trust, “I know I lost the trust of the people who care for me and I am willing to do whatever it takes to gain back that trust.”; the seeking of forgiveness, “Please forgive me”; and expressions of shame, “I have learnt my lesson and I feel really ashamed of myself for what I have done and it hurt me so I am very sorry about everything.”
*Behavioural change.*

Twenty-two apology letters contained at least one proclamation of behavioural change.

Improved awareness of the consequences of misusing fire. Sixteen young people referred to an improved understanding of the consequences associated with misuse of fire and an associated proclamation that they would not misuse fire again in the future: “The fire education session was very informative and a real eye opener to the dangers of fire lighting…I have learnt my lesson.”, and “Since I went to the conference I have really thought about what a silly thing it was to do and I am really sorry for doing it. I have really thought just how bad lighting fires are.”

Promise to forebear. Thirteen apology letters included promises that the behaviour would not be repeated in the future: “I promise I will never do it again…” and “All I can do is apologise to you who have been affected by my mistake, and swear that you will never hear of me committing an offence again.”

Belief in an acquired capacity to make better decisions in the future. Ten young people indicated that they would not misuse fire in the future because they now believed they had the capacity to make better decisions: “I have made some changes since I was caught as to think twice before I make decisions...” and “I think that if someone said to do it again it would be hard for me to say no but I would definitely say no.”

Belief that the behaviour will lead to the imposition of sanctions. Five young people referred to the potential imposition of sanctions: “… now I know that I could have killed someone or put them in hospital and I could have been sent to a detention centre…” and “I now have realised fires are not as much fun as I thought they were because most of the time they just cause bad moments in life and get you into trouble and I assure you I will never do this again”.

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Discussion

The results presented above provide some insight into the reasons young people attributed to their YMF, and how young people experienced, interpreted, and reacted to the fire safety messages delivered to them by firefighters in the context of conferencing.

The interagency agreements governing conferencing for YMF assume that the provision of education by a firefighter in the context of conferencing will improve young people’s understanding of the consequences of misusing fire, which will in turn reduce recidivism. Content analysis revealed that 16 young people attributed their YMF to a lack of awareness of the consequences, while seven young people did not. These findings highlight that education about the consequences of misusing fire may not have been sufficient to reduce YMF in all cases. This aligns with existing literature which suggests that fire education may not be sufficient in and of itself due to the complexity and fluidity of YMF (Pinsonneault, Richardson, & Pinsonneault, 2002).

All young people who wrote apology letters included in the sample experienced and interpreted at least one fire safety message delivered to them by firefighters in the context of conferencing. All of the lessons learned pertained to the actual or potential consequences of YMF. This finding indicates that the provision of information about the consequences of misusing fire stimulated change in the way young people cognised their behaviour. This is particularly significant for those young people who attributed their YMF to a lack of understanding of the consequences.

The reactions of young people to these messages were elucidated through an analysis of proclamations which co-occurred with the fire safety messages cognised. These proclamations included those of responsibilisation, remorse, and behavioural change.
The majority of young people used their apology letters to accept full responsibility for their behaviour however, six young people used their apology letters to mitigate their responsibility. These young people attributed their behaviour to deliberate actions taken to achieve a desired outcome (enjoyment, mitigation of boredom, helping others) or factors outside of their control (accident, intoxication, peer pressure). Acceptance of responsibility is central to the effectiveness of conferencing because it is associated with acknowledgement of wrongdoing and harm caused (Braithwaite, 2002). For the six young people who mitigated responsibility, the efficacy of the program may have been reduced.

While all but one apology letter included a direct apology for YMF, only half of the letters contained an expression of remorse. Remorse is an important consideration because it can have long term positive effects which act as the catalyst for behavioural change (Hayes, 2006). For those young people who did not use their apology letters to express remorse, the effectiveness of the program may have been diminished.

Finally, all but one young person included at least one proclamation of behavioural change within their apology letter. Proclamations of behavioural change are noteworthy because they have been found to play a significant role in reducing recidivism (Johnston, 2016). This finding indicates that the provision of information about the consequences of misusing fire may have stimulated cognitive and behavioural change in young people regardless of their acceptance of responsibility or expressions of remorse.

**Limitations**

These findings must be considered in context of their limitations. First, only those apology letters maintained and retrieved by Juvenile Justice NSW and Tasmania Fire Service were included in the study. Any missing data may mean findings are not representative of all apology letters written by young people during the data collection period. Second, young
people who completed a letter of apology as a component of their outcome plan may differ systematically from those who did not. Third, apology letter content is likely to reflect young people’s stage of development. Developmental stage will effect a young person’s language and literacy skills, capacity to express themselves, and ability to comprehend consequences. Given the data was de-identified, the developmental stage of each young person could not be ascertained. Apology letter content may also reflect suggestions made by those monitoring the completion of the outcome plan task. It was thus not possible to determine whether apology letters provided true reflections of the thoughts and feelings of young people or whether these differed by developmental stage. Finally, there is evidence to suggest that apology letters written by young people may not be sincere (Hayes, 2006). There is thus a possibility that apology letters were written to ensure successful completion of the outcome plan rather than as a reflection of genuine thought and emotion. All findings should be considered within the context of these limitations.

Conclusion
The efficacy of diversionary conferencing for YMF relies upon the assumption that YMF manifests from a lack of awareness of the consequences, and that information about the actual and potential consequences of YMF delivered by a firefighter in the context of conferencing will reduce the likelihood of recidivism. This study has found that young people do attribute their YMF to a lack of awareness of the consequences. For these young people, conferencing for YMF may be sufficient. The program provides an avenue through which firefighters deliver education that has the capacity to stimulate change in the way young people cognise fire and the way they intend to use fire in the future. Conferencing for YMF may therefore act as a catalyst for cognitive and behavioural change, and thus a reduction in recidivism. However, young people also attribute their YMF to deliberate actions taken to
achieve a desired outcome or factors outside of their control. For these young people, conferencing for YMF may be insufficient. Identification of the reasons young people attribute to their YMF is therefore important to determine whether participation in conferencing for YMF has the capacity to stimulate cognitive and behavioural change, or whether additional support services may be required. Despite contributing to existing literature, these findings are constrained by the limitations of the study. Future research may benefit from primary data collection to conduct quantitative and qualitative enquiry into the influence firefighter involvement and the provision of fire education have on young people who participate in diversionary conferencing for YMF.

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*Young Offenders Act 1997 (NSW)*
Youth Justice Act 1997 (Tas)