Bill Jones, a 14-year-old youth who lived with his mother and her alcoholic boyfriend, now has become a ward of the courts. Currently serving a one-year sentence for bringing a gun to school, Bill had been on probation for setting a Molotov cocktail through a kitchen window.

He’s had a history of setting small fires as well as chaining neighborhood dogs in his backyard and abusing them. His mother, who probation workers describe as “overprotective,” claims she never knew about the dogs because she never went out in the backyard.

“I used to just play with matches, and I just started setting fires,” Bill explained. “I wasn’t mad at nobody. I did it because I wanted to. Some people like fire, I guess, but I know I wouldn’t want to get burned by one. I know the reason one guy threw cocktails was because he wanted to go to jail to get away from his father. I didn’t even know why I set those fires. I wasn’t doing it to be big and bad or anything like that. It just came to my mind, and I went out and did it. I did it once and I did it again. It’s like I got greedy or something.”

The fourth category, that of “severely disturbed” firesetters, runs the gamut in age but generally constitutes a very small percentage of cases. In our San Bernardino study group, only twelve juveniles (11 percent) were categorized as severely disturbed. However, as we point out in Chapters 8 and 9, those juveniles who have been sexually abused or have sexual difficulties, and those juveniles
housed in the state correctional facilities, have all been found by the courts to be severely disturbed and often incorrigibly delinquent.

In our small group, all but one were Caucasian and all but one were male. Most fell into the thirteen- to seventeen-year-old age category, although there were a few younger children who were quite disturbed as well. Close to 70 percent of the eighty-four items on the behavioral problems checklist typify these youngsters, according to their parents.

In general, their behavior fell into two major personality types. One type was a psychological character disorder of an "impulsive neurotic" pattern, with such characteristics as being impatient, being impulsive, stealing, destroying own possessions, and having problems sleeping. The second type was a psychological character disorder of a "borderline psychotic" pattern, with behaviors such as extreme mood swings, uncontrolled anger, violence, bizarre speech, and numerous phobias.

One of our young firesetters, "Barry," age six, fit the pattern of the "impulsive neurotic." Barry was in the first grade and was the older of two children. According to his mother, he has been in trouble since he was two and was disciplined twice a day. His father was very strict, and the boy had told his grandmother that "Daddy is mean, hates me, and gives me bad looks."

The boy's father had recently been in court for a drunk driving offense that had caused a fatality. The father was going to serve time in prison; hence, the boy was told that he would have to become the "man of the house." In response, Barry set three fires. The first was a trash fire in the kitchen; then he burned his baseball glove; finally, he set the living-room couch on fire—and that was on Father's Day. That morning, the boy had awakened before his parents, crept downstairs to the living room, set the