



Fire Prevention Strategies for College Students

By Tracy Golinveaux

I come from a family with careers in the fire protection industry. After years of practicing home escape plans, building the perfect campfire, and watching fire sprinkler tests I have gained a great respect for the power fire can have. As a recent college graduate, I learned that not everyone understands the hazards associated with fire. A student would accidentally microwave popcorn for 20:00 minutes instead of 2:00 and wondered why the entire dormitory would need to be evacuated. Shower caps and plastic bags were used to cover smoke detectors and power strips were strung together in groups of three. To avoid noise complaints, some students held parties in their basements. Mixing 50 or more students, one exit, and alcohol in a basement is something that occurs every weekend. Are the students unaware of the fire hazards they are exposing themselves to? Or are they choosing to ignore them?

I would say both. Some students do not realize that they are putting themselves in danger when they create fire hazards, like plugging multiple power strips together. Others may recognize the fire hazard but simply believe that a fire actually occurring is unlikely. However, the data proves otherwise. Between 2004 and 2008 over 3,800 structure fires were reported in dormitories, fraternities, sororities, and barracks. These fires result in an average of 7 deaths a year. (NFPA)

Students who intentionally disobey fire safety precautions are the ones that concern me the most. I recently heard a story about a group of students in a dormitory who figured out they could get away with smoking in their rooms if they filled the gaps within the smoke detectors with peanut butter. This trick wasn't easily spotted by staff or inspectors, like a shower cap or plastic bag would be, and it allowed the students to smoke without setting off alarms. These students not only introduced a new hazard into their own rooms, but they

also put the lives of other students in danger.

Students should be aware that the best type of fire prevention starts with taking responsibility. Many fire hazards on-campus can be regulated by college or University authorities. Dormitory sprinkler systems and fire alarms are well maintained and egress paths are kept clear. Some on-campus housing units enforce regular inspections of dorm rooms or apartments, which forces students to comply with the campus rules. These inspections might be done by the campus housing department or even a residential advisor who lives in the dormitory with the students. Inspections and testing of life safety systems, like sprinklers and fire alarms, are required by many of the NFPA codes and standards, and are conducted on regular intervals by registered professional. Students should understand that these systems are designed to help them survive if a fire was to occur, but it is the students themselves who can prevent fires from occurring in the first place.

NFPA's research proves that "structure fires in dormitories, fraternities, sororities, and barracks are more common during the evening hours between 5-11 pm, as well as on weekends" (Flynn, 2009). This time frame includes the time when students are cooking dinner, attending parties, and drinking alcohol. These individual factors increase fire risk. When occurring together, crowds and alcohol mixed with a fire source can be fatal.

Although many students survive their college years on microwavable noodles and Hot Pockets, cooking equipment still causes 75% of the reported structure fires and is responsible for 41% of civilian injuries in on-campus housing units. (NFPA) Many students living on-campus are living on their own for the first time and a handful of them have never used cooking equipment before. Many campus dwellings allow students to have microwaves in

their rooms and some even have community kitchens equipped with stoves and ovens. Students should be reminded not to leave cooking food unattended and to make sure that cook tops are free from any combustible materials.

The second highest leading cause of residential fires on campuses involves trash or rubbish (NFPA). Students should be reminded not only to properly dispose of their trash but to remove trash within the living spaces often. Cigarettes should be properly extinguished and not thrown into trash cans or mulch beds. Between 2003 and 2006, cigarettes accounted for only 2% of the structure fires that occurred in campus dwellings but resulted in 39% of the deaths (NFPA).

When a fire does occur on campus, students should understand what to do next. Many campuses practice fire drills in dormitories. Some colleges and Universities have installed emergency notification systems throughout their campuses and their safety departments are able to respond to emergencies faster than the local fire or police department. Students should be aware of their campus's policies for notification and should be trained on how to use notification systems properly.

Most campus fires are accidental and even if students are aware of fire safety practices, fires still occur. Colleges and Universities should continue to promote fire safety and be sure to remind students of even the

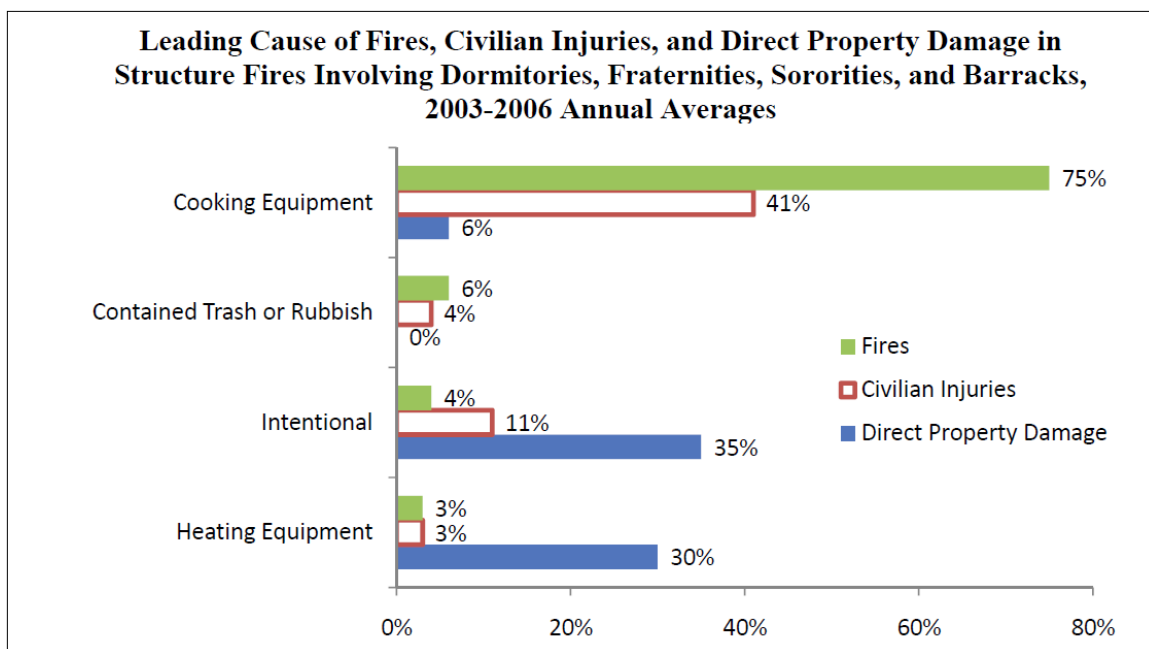


Figure 1: Leading Cause of Fires, Civilian Injuries, and Direct Property Damage in Structure Fires Involving Dormitories, Fraternities, Sororities, and Barracks (NFPA)

Some students may think that all of these fire safety tips are common sense and there is no reason to give them any thought. These common acts of leaving cooking unattended or disposing of a cigarette into a trash can are real examples of campus fires that have occurred and continue to occur every few months around the country.

A website called www.campusfiresafety.org tracks recent campus fires around the country. A quick scan of the fires that have occurred in April and May of 2011 proves that students and young adults are causing fires that could have been prevented, like microwave fires and candles left burning unattended.

most common sense safety tips. It could save their lives.

Tracy Golinveaux,
Associate Fire Protection Engineer, National Fire Protection Association

Works Cited

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