Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Identify cultural beliefs and traditions that influence fire prevention.
2. Describe the multicultural society of your community.
3. Describe the fire service culture and its impact on fire prevention.
4. Describe how multicultural beliefs and traditions may be an advantage for fire prevention efforts.
5. Identify the relationship between economic factors and fire prevention.
6. Identify the difference between direct and indirect fire losses.
7. Describe the disparity between high costs of fire and lower perceptions of fire risk.
8. Describe policies and programs that afford economic trade-offs for fire prevention.

Unit Lesson

Social and Cultural Influences on Fire Prevention

It should be no surprise to anyone that the United States is becoming a multicultural society. Before we can understand that, we must understand the term culture and how it affects prevention efforts.

A multicultural society is one that is made up of numerous cultures, all maintaining some sense of cultural identity, while melding certain aspects of their cultures into a common set of traditions and beliefs. For example, there are many cultures in the United States, but what they have in common is a belief in personal freedom and a democratic society where people have power over government.

Cultural (Social) Impacts on Fire Risk

Culture affects fire risk through traditions, customs, and beliefs. These are learned through experience and passed on from generation to generation. They govern the way people behave, and that has a direct impact on fire risk. What people believe about fire is an essential factor in how they handle it.

How people use fire is also a factor in fire risk. Those who cook with open fires may be at greater risk than those who do not. People also have beliefs and demonstrate behaviors toward fire that are not ethnically related. Many people use candles extensively in religious ceremonies, with no adverse effects. But we often see fires caused by candles that have been left unattended, which have ignited combustibles nearby, destroying homes and businesses and killing or injuring people.

There is another distinction that should be drawn here. The elderly make up a good percentage of fall injuries, but this is not because of their values or beliefs.
It is more a matter of age, and the gradual failing of their bodies and balance systems.

It is also possible for cultural values to contribute to a decreased risk of fires. International studies—notably by TriData Corporation, a division of System Planning Corporation of Virginia—have drawn some links between various cultures and reduced risk of fire. The Japanese culture is often given as a primary example. In Japan, people who have fires are admonished by their neighbors for being careless.

**History's Impact of Culture**

In cultures where those who start fires even “accidentally” are held responsible for the results, fire loss rates tend to be much lower than in the United States.

**The U. S. and a Multicultural Society**

More recent immigration from Latin America, Asia, India, and other countries has begun to create numerous subcultures, leading some to describe the United States as a melting pot of human society. Each demographic population or cultural base has unique attributes, some of which will affect fire prevention efforts aimed at them. It seems reasonable to assume that larger populations of these cultures will mean they have a larger share of the nations’ fire problem as well.

**The Fire Service Culture and Its Impact on Fire Prevention Efforts**

Like specific ethnic or national cultures, organizations tend to develop local cultures of their own. Other aspects of fire service culture are also driven by the reality of the job. Because the work is physically demanding—and dangerous—strength and courage are traits valued by the group.

**Fire Prevention and Fire Service Culture**

Prevention usually accounts for less than seven to eight percent of a fire department’s personnel. The tendency to place value on what is most prevalent is common. Throughout the history of the fire service in the United States, fire prevention has been espoused by many fire service leaders and fire chiefs as the real reason for existing. In the fire service context, when prevention is supported by the organization’s leadership, and when promotion decisions are based not just on firefighting skill, but on a commitment to prevention, then the organizational values will begin to change, and prevention will begin to be valued more than it has been in the U. S. Fire Service.

It is important to keep in mind that educational or outreach efforts must be designed to reach a diverse audience. It is also important to recognize that when communities look at anyone trying to reach them, they will open themselves up more readily to people who look and act like them.

**Economic Influences on Fire Prevention**

The relationship between economic factors and fire prevention is part of the overall economic picture related to fire protection costs as a whole.
Direct Versus Indirect Costs of Fire

Direct fire losses are fairly easy to describe, but more difficult to assess. When we consider the cost of a fire in dollars, it is fairly simple to state the loss in those terms. Indirect fire losses are those that can be extrapolated from the direct costs associated with replacement, but are more difficult to describe. The cost of a human life for example, cannot truly be quantified, though some have tried to describe it in terms of earning power lost over a lifetime.

The Cost of Fire in the United States

Both the U. S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) produce reports estimating the cost of fire in the United States. In addition to economic losses, the NFPA model has an aspect that is not usually considered: the cost of fire protection.

As an example of how to look at the cost of fire, this approach is very different from what has occurred in the past. And when we are looking for examples of how to quantify the losses—and to describe them in a meaningful manner—we can look to both the U. S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Protection Association for ways to do so.

The Disparity Between Costs and Risk

How does the relationship between our perceived risk and our actual risk affect the economic benefit we assign fire protection? Using the Robinson Crusoe Example, it is simple. If we perceive the level of risk to be high, then the amount of brush clearing we are willing to perform would naturally be higher.

The Economic Value of Prevention

The raw economic value of prevention efforts only becomes clear after years of effort. If we can provide evidence that fire loss trends have been lowered because of our efforts, then we have compelling arguments for the quantitative value of those efforts. There are ways to gather evidence that prevention programs produce results. One is to identify other economic factors that may show the value of prevention efforts. Regardless of the limitations involved, we can begin to describe the benefits of our prevention programs in terms of dollars, and there are other substantive ways of doing so.

How Students Can Apply This Lesson To Their Department

- Research the social and cultural demographics of your community.
- Compare fire data about fire incidents that have occurred in various communities.
- Become more involved with fire and life safety education presentations.

Reference