

Fire Incidence/Death Rates

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RJR I n t e r o f f i c e M e m o r a n d u m


Subject: BRC

Date: April 17, 1986

To: Alan Rodgman

From: Mary E. Ward

I enclose a report which I received from John Rupp. The information is pertinent to the Technical Study Group, but should not be discussed publicly.



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Encl.

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Philip S. Schaenman
President

March 5, 1986

MEMORANDUM TO: Peter Sparber
Susan Stuntz
The Tobacco Institute

John Rupp ✓
Covington & Burling

FROM: Philip Schaenman *ES for PSS*

SUBJECT: Revised Careless Smoking Fire Incidence and Death Rates

As promised, we obtained the newly available 1984 National Fire Incidence Reporting System (NFIRS) tapes from the U.S. Fire Administration. We analyzed the data to fill in the 1984 points on the trend charts I previously sent you. Also, we have a revised estimate for 1982.

The key new finding is that careless smoking fire deaths went down again, but careless smoking fires leveled off or rose slightly.

The issue of trends is going to get publicity and be a major point of discussion in the Fire Safety Cigarette Study. A contract is going to be let by CPSC to NFPA to predict where the careless smoking fire problem is heading over the next 10 years with or without modifications to the cigarette.

The overall trend from 1977 to 1984 is sharply downward for the careless smoking fire problem. There is no definitive information on what causes this, and many in the fire world speculate erroneously that it is because of reduced smoking levels. My own feeling is that it is largely due to the tremendous increase and use of smoke detectors. Because of that, the trend is likely to level out as the detector market saturates, and possibly may even start increasing as the older smoke detectors fail.

The increase might be averted by continuing the pressure on the public to use and maintain their detectors, and by expanded public education programs urging carefulness.

Methodological Issue

The approach I followed in making the estimates tracks with the way the U.S. Fire Administration has made them since its inception. I did not develop a new approach since becoming a consultant to TI. It happens that the approach I originated and thought the most fair presentation of the problem while I was Associate Administrator of USFA is not the approach that CPSC and hence NFPA will be following. They will have estimates that will be about 10 percent higher than mine. The trends portrayed by the two approaches should parallel each other but be offset in deaths by 100-200 a year.

I have made arrangements with CPSC to provide me with a memo describing in detail the methodology which they use and have recommended to NFPA for providing data to the committee.

If you wish, I can repeat the trend calculations using the CPSC/NFPA approach. Of what I know so far about the differences between their approach and mine, they are as follows:

- CPSC counts firefighter deaths and injuries in computing losses from careless smoking fires. We just present the civilian losses. Careless smoking fires are usually smaller and less damaging to firefighters than other causes. Firefighters who are hurt usually do something careless at the scene, if not suffer a heart attack from being out of condition. But many will construe it as a fair "cost" to consider.
- A second and probably more important factor is that the Fire Administration used an hierarchy of causes. If a fire was put in a category at the top of the hierarchy, it was not considered for the levels below. The first cause in the hierarchy was arson. The theory is that if a fire was intentionally started, it doesn't matter whether it was a cigarette or match or whatever that was used to light the fire. The arsonist would have found something to light it anyhow. And fire safe cigarettes are extremely unlikely to reduce the number of arson fires.
- The second cause in the hierarchy is "children playing." Usually they use matches, but sometimes they use other heat sources, including cigarettes. It is not known how many of these "children playing" fires are really juvenile arson cases where the child would find some suitable source if they wanted to start a fire, as opposed to causes where the child play acts with cigarettes or actually smokes them and then drops the cigarette. The more it is the latter, the more legitimate case can be made for including those fires in considering fire safe cigarettes. My suspicion is that it is more likely to be the former. (I plan to consult Pat Mieszala on this.)

The incidence in 1984 of careless smoking fires in residences leveled out or rose slightly. This is the first year since at least 1977 in which there was not a clear decline. Part of the problem is that the decline has been so great already. In terms of deaths, the decline in careless smoking continued. Deaths did not start to drop as rapidly as did careless smoking fires, possible because it took longer for the population at greatest risk to obtain detectors.

If a simple extrapolation were made from the last two years of fire incidences, it would show the careless smoking problem staying level forever or actually going up. If the multi-year trend were used, then it would show the problem going to zero about the year 1992. For fire deaths, the problem would go to zero by about 1999 if the last two years or the trend is used.

Note the dotted lines in the figures. They represent an estimate of what the trend would have been if the USFA had continued making death estimates. The solid line curves are those based on the official USFA death estimates. However, starting in 1982, USFA no longer published the higher death estimates that you get from starting with National Center of Health Statistics death certification information. Instead, they use death estimates from the NFPA fire department survey, which tends to be significantly lower than the previous USFA methodology. In the dotted lines we show what the death estimates would be if the USFA estimate had been continued. One could also compute what the estimates would be if you believed the lower NFPA numbers. It does not add much to magnitude of the total problem to use the higher figures, which I believe are a more accurate portrayal of the situation, and it seems to me good PR for TI to be embracing the larger numbers when most people would assume the opposite. But even these higher curve numbers are lower than what CPSC estimates.

Action

Please let me know whether you want me to compute the curves using the CPSC methodology that they are asking NFPA to use for the Fire Safe Cigarette Study, so we can see ahead of time what their results will be, and we have a basis upon which to check NFPA.

Attachments

FIGURE 1.

Causes of Residential Fires

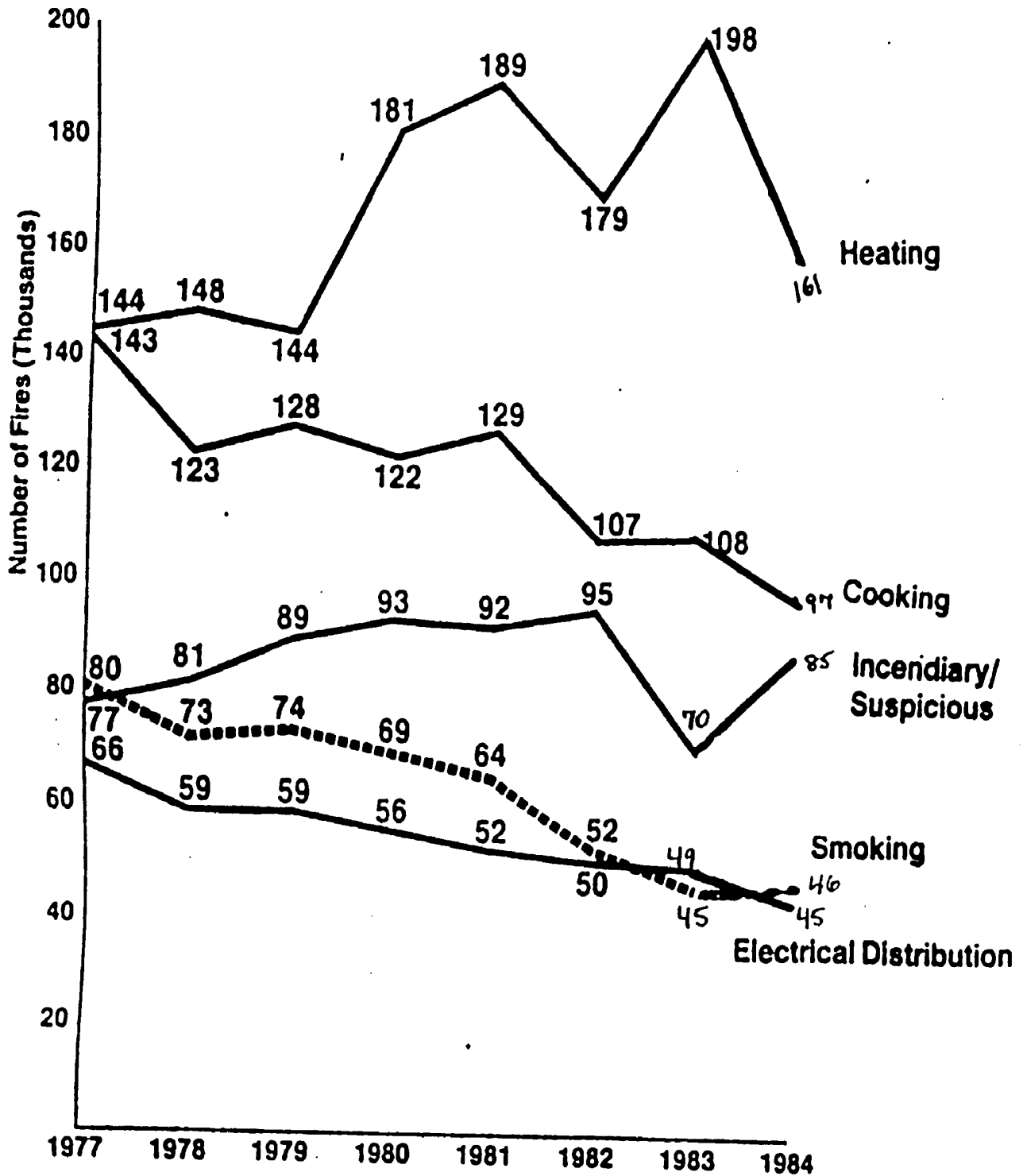


FIGURE 2.

Causes of Fires in One- and Two-Family Dwellings

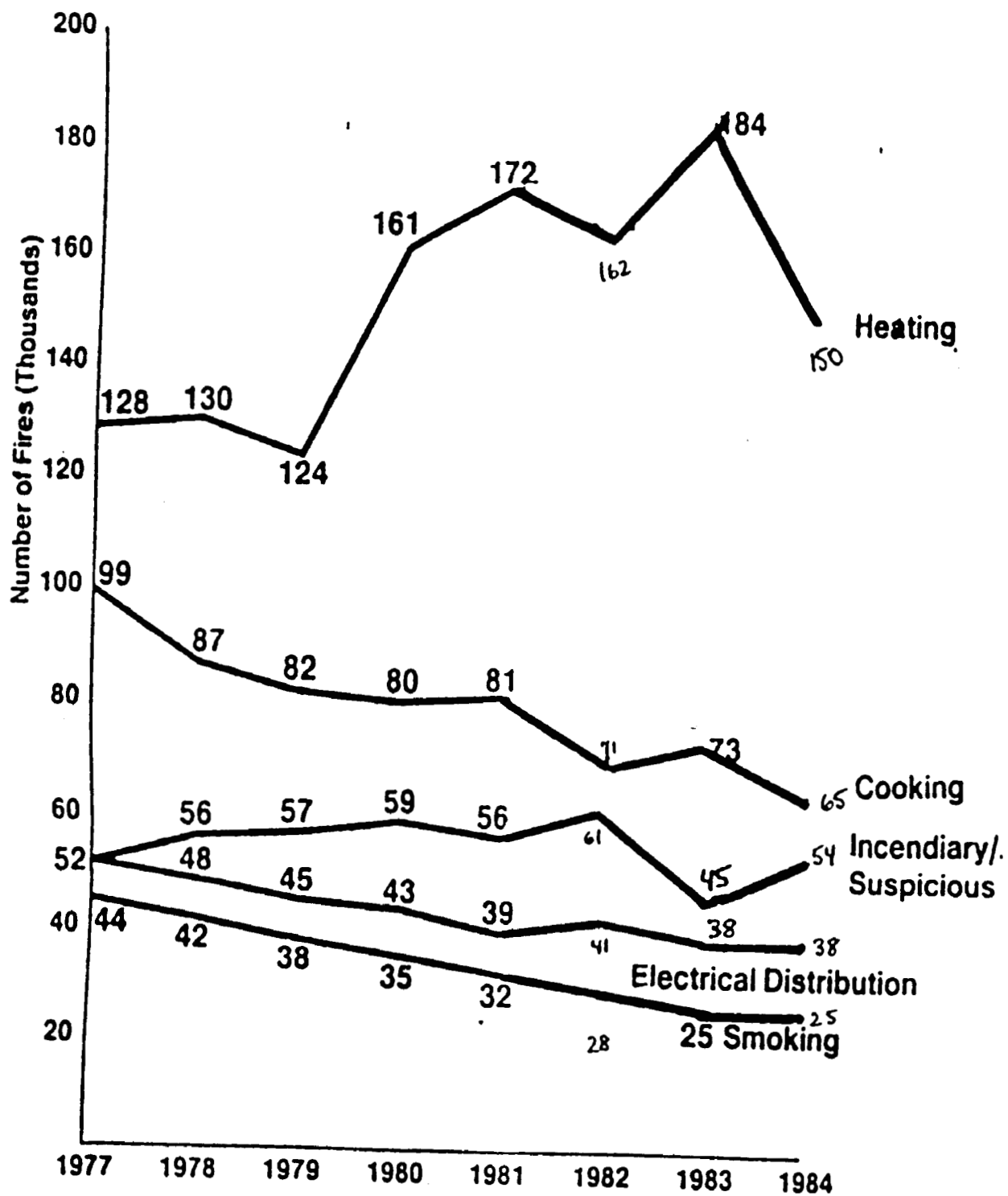


FIGURE 3.

Causes of Apartment Fires

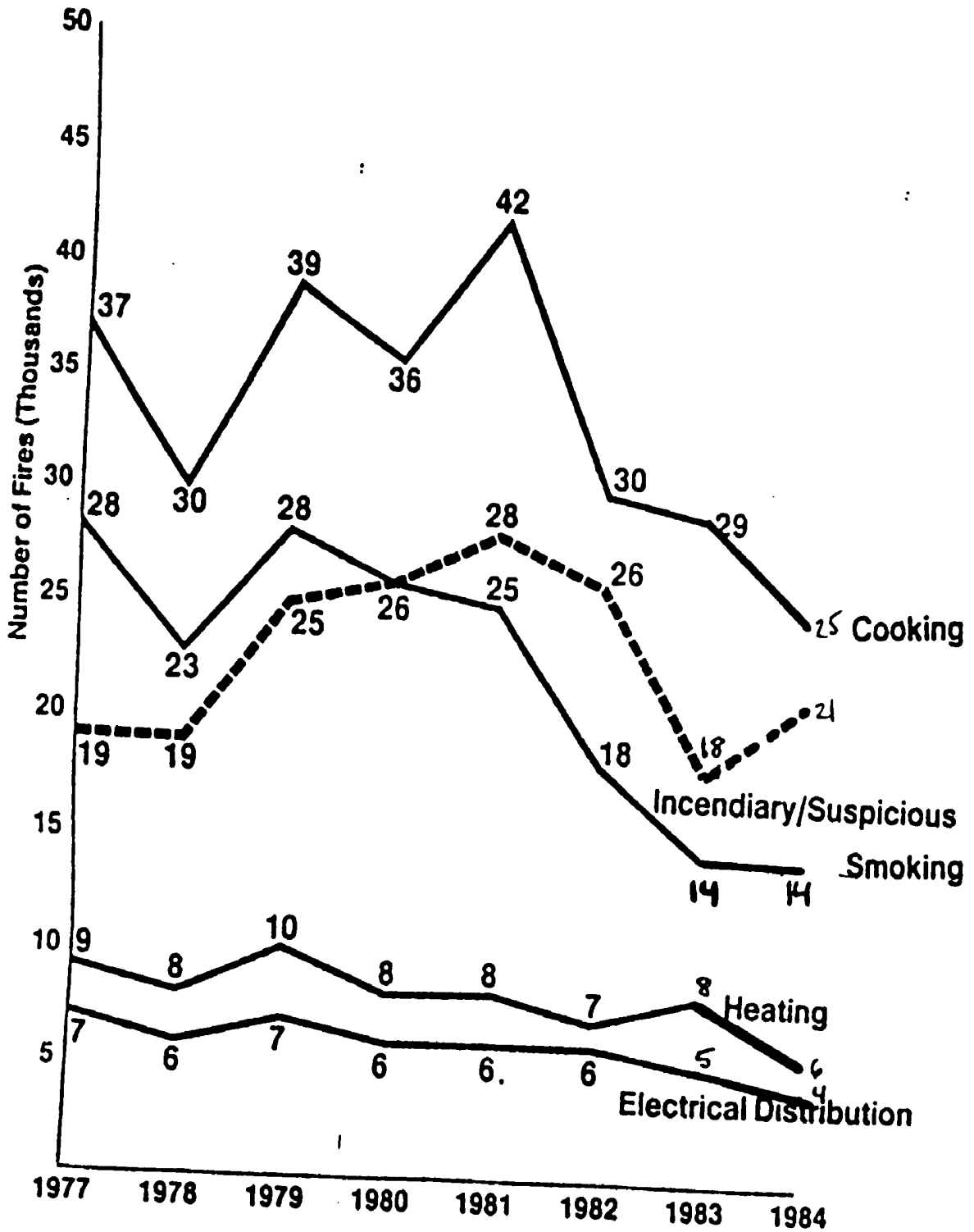


FIGURE 4.

Causes of Residential Fire Deaths

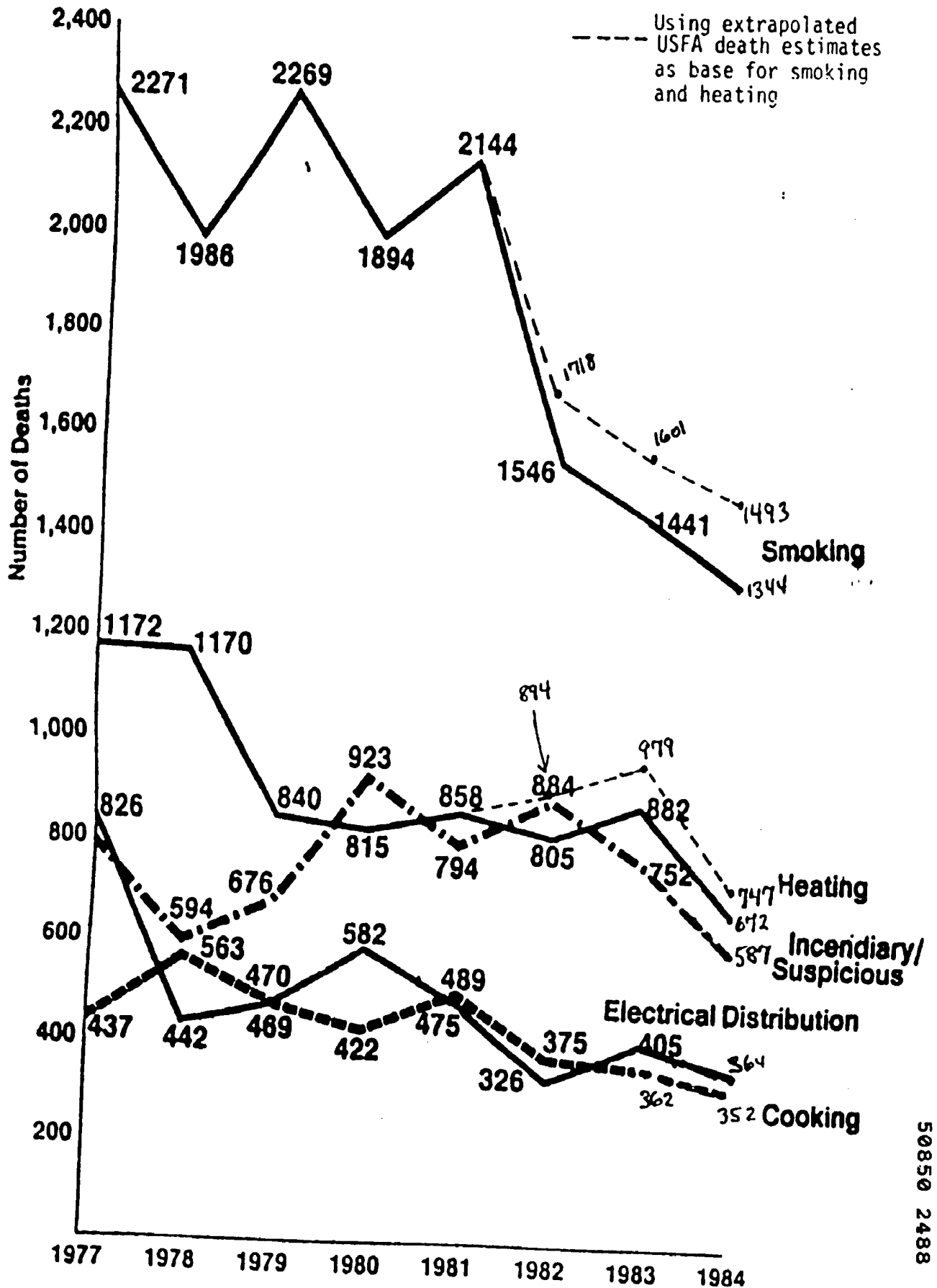


FIGURE 5.

Causes of Fire Deaths: Apartments

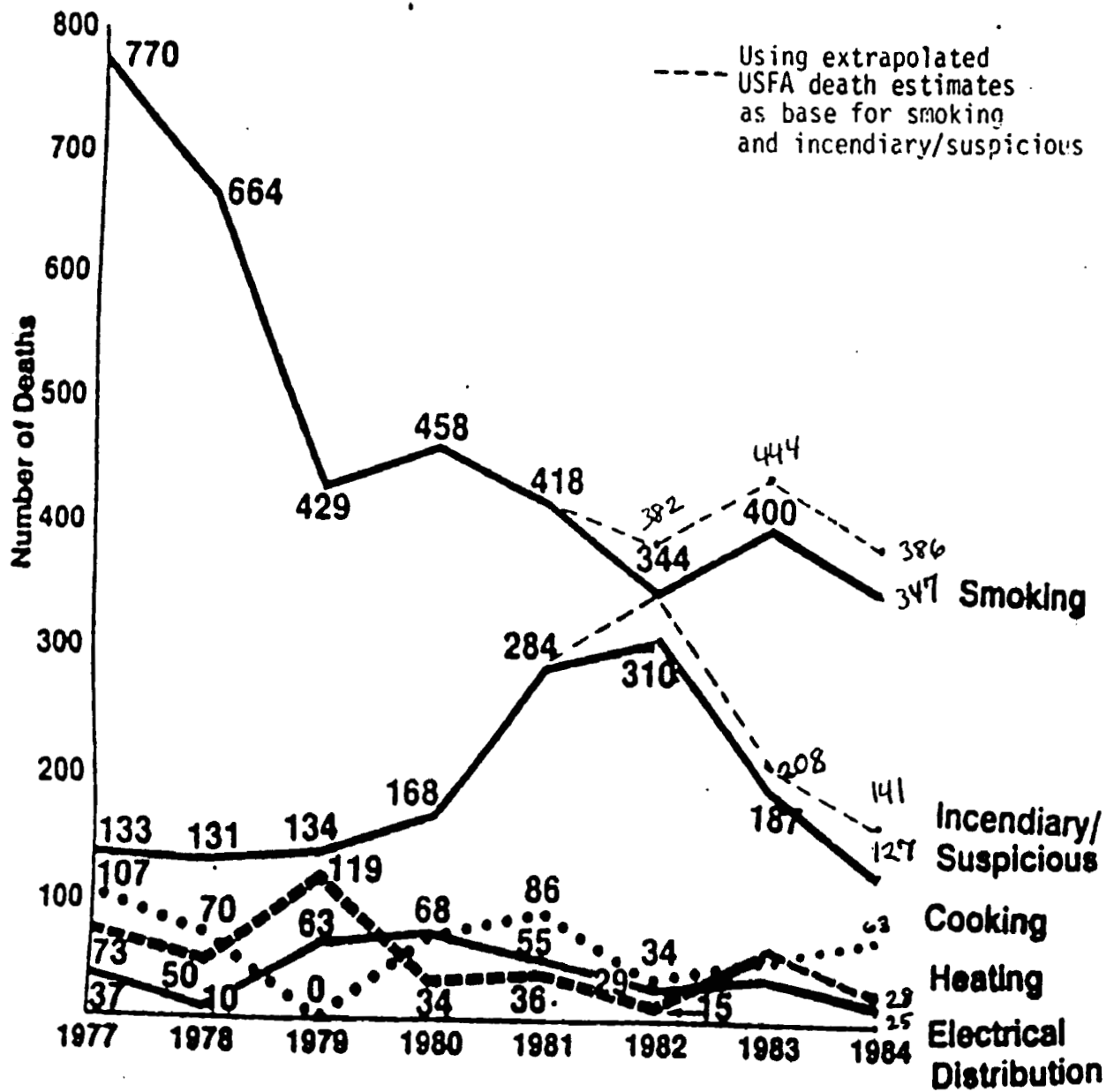


FIGURE 6.

Causes of Fire Deaths: One- and Two-Family Dwellings

