CASE STUDIES

Berns Triplets (1988)
At 6:00 p.m., on September 21, 1988, the Berns triplets were asleep in their crib. They were 17 months old. Their father, Scott Berns, was asleep on the couch. He woke up when he noticed smoke filling the room. He immediately ran outside of the home and shattered the triplets’ window. The three girls were pulled from the burning house. Their mother, Patti Berns, died from smoke inhalation. The girls had third-degree burns, but they survived. Police suspected arson from the beginning. Suspicious burn patterns suggested that the fire had started near the couch where Scott Berns had been sleeping. Figure 4-21 shows the home after the fire was extinguished.

After almost two years, Berns was indicted. Berns abused prescription and illegal drugs. Witnesses said that he had shot at his wife’s car earlier that day as she was leaving the home. However, it is very difficult to determine exactly what happened in cases of arson. The jury decided that there was reasonable doubt in the case against Scott Berns. Three strangers had been seen near the home the day of the fire. It was possible that the strangers had started the fire. Scott Berns was acquitted.

Figure 4-21. The Berns’ home after the fire.

Think Critically 1. What does it mean that the “jury decided that there was reasonable doubt”?

2. Why is it often very difficult to prove arson cases?