Firesetting and general criminal recidivism among a consecutive sample of Finnish pretrial male firesetters: A register-based follow-up study

Annika Thomson\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Jari Tiihonen\textsuperscript{b,c,d}, Jouko Miettunen\textsuperscript{e,f}, Matti Virkkunen\textsuperscript{g}, Nina Lindberg\textsuperscript{g}

\textsuperscript{a} Psychiatry, Kellokoski Hospital, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital, Finland
\textsuperscript{b} Niuronieni Hospital, Kuopio, Finland
\textsuperscript{c} University of Eastern Finland, Department of Psychiatry, Kuopio, Finland
\textsuperscript{d} Karolinska Institute, Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Stockholm, Sweden
\textsuperscript{e} Medical Research Center Oulu, Oulu University Hospital and University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland
\textsuperscript{f} Center for Life Course Health Research, University of Oulu, Finland
\textsuperscript{g} Forensic Psychiatry, University of Helsinki and Helsinki University Hospital, Helsinki, Finland

A B S T R A C T

The rate of criminal reoffending among firesetters varies greatly. Our aim was to investigate firesetting and general criminal recidivism in a consecutive sample of Finnish males who were sent for a forensic psychiatric examination (FPE)\textsuperscript{a} after committing firesetting offenses. We also wanted to evaluate the relationships between psychopathy and criminal recidivism, and between schizophrenia-spectrum disorders and criminal recidivism. The sample comprised 113 firesetters with a mean age of 32.8 years, and the average follow-up time was 16.9 years. The FPE statements of the firesetters were reviewed and psychiatric diagnoses were collected. The psychopathy assessments were based on the 20-item Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Information on reoffending was gathered from the Finnish National Police Register. During the follow-up 20 (18\%) persons were registered for a new reoffending, and 84 (74\%) for any new offense. Firesetters with high traits (PCL-R ≥25) of psychopathy were more likely than those with low traits (PCL-R < 25) to reoffend with any crime during the follow-up. The risk of general criminal recidivism was lower among firesetters with a schizophrenia-spectrum disorder than among those with non-psychotic disorders. Conclusively, both firesetting and general criminal-recidivism rates were high in this sample of offenders.

1. Introduction\textsuperscript{b}

Arson, the intentional destruction of property by fire for unlawful purposes, and other deliberate firesetting acts are easily performed crimes, but they are hard to investigate because much of the evidence is destroyed in the fire. These fires may result in devastating personal and economic damage. In the US, there were 1.2–1.4 million fires reported each year in 2010–2014 (Brushlinsky et al., 2016), and more than 280,000 intentional fires were reported yearly to the US Fire Department in 2007–2011 (Campbell, 2014). The proportion of deliberate fires of all fires in England in the last decade was around 25\% (Home office, 2017), a figure somewhat lower than that observed in Finland as an average over the last five years (31.4\%) (Pelastustoimi, 2016). These numbers do not include cases in which the reason for ignition is undetermined, so the true figures for deliberate firesetting are probably higher.

Earlier research depicts arsonists as dangerous criminals who are likely to reoffend (Repo and Virkkunen, 1997a). However, later studies do not support this view (Brett, 2004). According to studies with follow-up periods of between six and 20 years, between four and 10\% (Ducat et al., 2015; Edwards and Grace, 2014; Soothill and Pope, 1973; Soothill et al., 2004), or up to 39\% (Repo et al., 1997) of firesetters reoffended with further deliberate firesetting, and from four (Barnett et al., 1997) to more than 60\% (Edwards and Grace, 2014; Repo and Virkkunen, 1997a, b; Rice and Harris, 1991) reoffended with any crime. The wide range of criminal recidivism rates among the studies is related to the different samples and settings (Brett, 2004).

Stoat et al. (2005) found in their study of 184 Finnish arsonists that 11\% of them reoffended with further deliberate fires, and 76\% with any crime during a 6.5-year follow-up period after serving a prison sentence.
sentence. Of those who committed any crime, 49% perpetrated at least one violent crime, and 58% at least one property crime during the follow-up after a deliberate firesetting. Other common crimes included traffic offenses (43%), drug-related offenses (23%), and sexual offenses (1%). The average delay between the index arson and any refoulling was 428 days (standard deviation (SD) 623, range 0–3073) after release from prison. It was reported in an Irish study among 54 firesetters, that seven of the 19 recidivists renewed their crime within six months, and the delay reported for the rest varied between six months and ten years (O'Sullivan and Kelleher, 1987). Soothill and Pope (1973) observed a delay of as long as 15 years for recidivist firesetting in their 20-year cohort study.

According to Edwards and Grace’s (2014) actuarial model for predicting arson recidivism, arsonists who were younger at the time of the index offence had faced more than one concurrent arson charge, had previously committed more vandalism offenses, and were significantly more likely to commit an arson offence in the future. Risk factors that have been reported among mentally disturbed arsonists include childhood firesetting, a young age at the time of the first firesetting, a high number of firesettings, arson as the only concurrent charge, a low intelligence quotient (IQ) (Rice and Harris, 1996), diminished responsibility (Barnett et al., 1999), poor social and relational skills, hostility (Hagenauw et al., 2015), and an expressed interest in fire/explosives (Tyler et al., 2015). Identified risk factors for general criminal recidivism include a high number of previous convictions, a less serious index offence, a versatile offending history, substance abuse (Pflueger et al., 2015), and a young age at examination (Pflueger et al., 2015; Staat et al., 2005). Edwards and Grace (2014) also reported the following significant predictors of violent recidivism in their above-mentioned actuarial model: first arson < 18 years of age, age at the first offence, and several prior violent and other offenses. In the case of non-violent criminal recidivism, the significant predictors turned out to be age at the first arson attempt, the number of prior thefts, as well as the number of prior drug offenses.

Psychopathy is defined as a constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral characteristics (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1991). On the interpersonal level, psychopathic individuals have been described as grandiose, arrogant, callous, dominant, superficial, and manipulative, whereas on the affective level they tend to be short-tempered, unable to form strong emotional bonds with others, and to lack guilt or anxiety. These interpersonal and affective features are associated with a socially deviant lifestyle that includes irresponsible behavior and a tendency to ignore or violate social conventions and norms (Hare, 1991). It is thus not unexpected that there is a strong correlation between psychopathy and crime (DeLisi, 2009), and particularly because psychopathy is known to predict both general and violent criminal recidivism (Firestone et al., 1998; Grann et al., 1999; Hart et al., 1988; Hawes et al., 2013; Mokros et al., 2014; Olver et al., 2013; Rice and Harris, 1992; Tengström et al., 2000). According to a recent study conducted by Thomson et al. (2015), there is a subgroup of arsonists with significant psychopathic traits. However, as far as the authors know, until now, psychopathy has not been studied from the perspective of arson recidivism.

Arson has been associated with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders (Anwar et al., 2011; Ducat et al., 2013; Geller, 1987; Lindberg et al., 2005; O'Sullivan and Kelleher, 1987), and diminished responsibility has been reported as a risk factor for arson recidivism (Barnett et al., 1999). In a sample of 90 Finnish recidivist arsonists sent for a forensic psychiatric examination (FPE), for example, 20% were diagnosed with a psychotic disorder (Lindberg et al., 2005). The number is high, given that the lifetime prevalence of all psychotic disorders is estimated to be 3.1%, and that of schizophrenia to be 0.9% in the Finnish general population (Perala et al., 2007). A diagnosis of schizophrenia has been reported to decrease the risk of subsequent violence, and hence to serve as a protective factor inhibiting further violence (Harris and Lurigio, 2007; Monahan et al., 2001).

Arson is a legal rather than a medical term. Research findings are therefore more or less country-specific, and their generalizability remains uncertain. We use the term firesetter in the present study to describe persons intentionally setting objects on fire, regardless of their motives or intentions. Our primary aim was to investigate firesetting and general criminal recidivism in a consecutive sample of Finnish males who were sent for an FPE after committing firesetting offenses. We hypothesized that firesetters would show a high rate of firesetting and general criminal recidivism. Second, knowing that the firesetters had been thoroughly psychiatrically examined we wanted to shed more light on the relationship between recidivism and psychopathy, as well as on the relationship between recidivism and a schizophrenia-spectrum disorder. We hypothesized that firesetting and general criminal recidivism would be related to both psychopathy and a disorder on the schizophrenia spectrum.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and sample

The minimum age of criminal liability in Finland is 15 years. According to Finnish law, when a person is charged with a crime the court decides whether an FPE is needed or not. Having decided on an examination it then requests the National Institute for Health and Welfare to make the necessary arrangements. FPEs, which are conducted either in a state or municipal psychiatric hospital or in a psychiatric hospital for prisoners, are inpatient evaluations lasting approximately two months. They include data gathering from various sources, psychiatric evaluation, standardized psychological tests, interviews conducted by a multi-professional team, evaluation of the offender’s physical condition, and continuous observation of the offender by hospital staff. The final FPE statement includes an opinion on the level of criminal responsibility, possible psychiatric diagnoses, and an assessment as to whether or not the offender fulfills the criteria for involuntary psychiatric care. The overall quality and reliability of Finnish FPEs are considered high among both courts and scientists (Kronen et al., 2000).

The study population comprised a consecutive sample of 114 male firesetters who were subjected to a pretrial FPE in 1990–1998 at Helsinki University Hospital because of firesetting offenses, mainly arson. One subject had a security prohibition denying access to his charts and was thus excluded from the analyses. The final number of subjects included in the study was 113.

We collected the following data from the FPE: name, personal identification number, index day, possible earlier convictions according to official criminal records, and all diagnoses.

2.2. Psychopathy

We used the 20-item Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) to assess the level of psychopathy among the subjects (Hare, 1991). It has become the standard for assessing psychopathy in forensic settings because of its reliability and validity (Gacono and Hutton, 1994; Grann et al., 1998; Hare et al., 2000). Every item is individually rated on a three-point scale (0 = absent, 1 = present to some degree or contradictory data, 2 = definitely present). Scores are summed resulting in a total maximum score of 40, scores ≥ 30 points being considered diagnostic of psychopathy (Hare, 2003). In line with recommendations to apply a lower cut-off score for European populations (Cooke and Michie, 1999; Hare et al., 2000; Sullivan et al., 2006), a cut-off of 25 has been used in studies in Scandinavian countries (Putkonen et al., 2010; Rasmussen et al., 1999; Thomson et al., 2015), and a score of 20 is sometimes considered to be a cut-off for “medium psychopathy” (Woodworth and Porter, 2002). PCL-R assessments can be made upon file information alone in research settings (Alterman et al., 1993; Grann et al., 1998; Mossman, 1994; Wong, 1988), although it is generally
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