

Focus on new research – part 2

Issue 12 of this bulletin noted Becker et al.'s study which looked at a link between firesetting and animal cruelty. In another recent study, Singer and Hensley (2004) drew on a 1988 FBI study by Ressler, Burgess and Douglass which found a possible link between firesetting and serial murder. Using a case study approach, Singer and Hensley found that a number of serial murderers had engaged in repeated firesetting in an attempt to relieve frustration resulting from childhood humiliation and rejection by close family members. One of the murderers, the 'Son of Sam' killer David Berkowitz, had recorded a journal of 1,488 fires he had started. The study's authors suggested that in each case firesetting had served to temporarily relieve the killers' frustrations and restore a sense of power and control. When this failed to fully eliminate their extreme feelings of rejection and humiliation, the offenders had progressed to serial murder.

A different approach to considering the role of firesetting was taken by Soothill, Ackerley and Francis (2004) who replicated an earlier study into the criminal careers of arsonists (Soothill & Pope 1973). The earlier study examined all those convicted of arson in England and Wales in 1951 and their rates of reconviction 20 years later. The later study extended this consideration by reviewing conviction rates in each of the decades from 1951 to 2000–2001. The two Soothill studies are valuable in challenging the majority of arson studies that have used samples drawn from psychiatric hospitals and prisons. The Soothill studies look at all persons convicted of arson in the relevant times and areas.

Soothill et al. (2004) found a range of significant changes in the picture of arson across time. They found a massive increase – approaching 50-fold – in the number of arson offences recorded in 2000–2001 compared with 1951, but without much change in the numbers convicted. The proportion of convicted female arsonists increased (from 4.1% to 14.2%) and the average age of all arsonists, males particularly, also increased. This latter finding may represent an increased use of schemes to divert young offenders away from the criminal justice system, so that fewer young offenders receive a criminal conviction. The greater availability of alternative sentences was also indicated by a decrease in the proportion of convicted arsonists who received a custodial sentence.

The proportion of arsonists with any previous conviction fell across the period of the study, but the proportion with a conviction for violence increased. Compared with offenders in the earlier group, those whose first conviction was for arson were more likely to go on to commit further offences. Twice as many were convicted of a subsequent arson offence. Those with previous offences were less likely to stop offending after their arson conviction. Overall, Soothill et al. (2004) concluded that 'the situation in relation to arson has deteriorated significantly over the past forty years.'

For more information:

Singer SD & Hensley C 2004. Applying social learning theory to childhood and adolescent firesetting: can it lead to serial murder? *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology* 48(4): 461–76

Soothill K, Ackerley E & Francis B 2004. The criminal careers of arsonists. *Medicine, science and the law* 44(1): 27–40