

## ***Are arsonists repeat offenders?***

There have been no published studies in Australia focusing on the offending history of arsonists, but a number of international studies have looked at arson and repeat offending. These studies have relied on samples of convicted arsonists, including those in prison and those receiving treatment in hospitals. However, many arsonists are not caught, and those who are may not necessarily face court or be sent to prison. This means that arsonists who are studied in prison or hospitals may not be representative of all arsonists.

To examine the relationship between arson reoffending and mental illness, Barnet, Richter and Renneberg (1999) studied 470 people who were convicted of arson between 1983 and 1985 in West Germany. They classified the arsonists by whether they were fully responsible, had diminished responsibility, or were found not guilty due to psychiatric reasons. Four percent of those fully responsible, 10 percent with diminished responsibility, and nine percent of those not guilty due to psychiatric reasons were reconvicted of arson within 10 years.

A UK study tracked the offending of three separate groups of arsonists who were convicted in 1951 (74 arsonists), 1963–65 (1,352 arsonists) and 1980–81 (5,584 arsonists), for a minimum of 20 years (Soothill, Ackerley & Francis, 2004). They found that the proportion of arsonists who were subsequently reconvicted for arson increased from 4.5 percent in the 1951 series, to 7.8 percent in the 1963–65 series and 10.7 percent in the 1980–81 series. When all other crimes were considered, 68 percent of the latest series had a subsequent conviction, with one third (32.5%) subsequently convicted of a violent offence. They concluded that the increased levels of arson recidivism were unlikely to reflect better detection or prosecution. Rather, the increases were likely to reflect a true increase in arson recidivism, although they did not offer any explanations for the increase.

A comprehensive review of the published international literature on recidivism of firesetters that used criminal records and hospital files found that repeat firesetting varied from four percent to 60 percent (Brett, 2004). The reviewed studies included forensic psychiatric, criminal justice and general and psychiatric hospital samples, and identified numerous methodological problems with the studies. It was found that there was insufficient evidence to label firesetters as dangerous recidivists, and that there was little information that could be used by psychiatrists in assessing the dangerousness of arsonists.

These studies suggest a wide range of recidivism levels for arsonists, depending on who is studied and the method used. Two notable absences in the published literature are the deliberate lighting of bushfires, a form of arson of much interest in Australia, and the involvement of young people in arson.

### ***References***

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