

Arsonists and violent offenders compared: two peas in a pod?

Since arson is an expensive offense for society - with an average cost of 12,796 dollar per arson - it is important to address in offender treatment in order to reduce recidivism. Actual pyromania (repeated arson for pleasure, gratification or relief) is rarely observed in arsonists, suggesting other incentives for this type of offense behavior. Supposing underlying aggressive motives, could imply that arsonists are a subtype of violent offender.

Advocating this, characteristics and risk factors of arsonists frequently seem to be similar to those of other offender's. Previous convictions, alcoholism, below average intelligence, and the presence of a mental disorder - in particular personality disorders (PDs) - increase the likelihood of relapse. Accordingly, studies comparing arsonists to other types of offenders found resemblances between these groups. Several demographic variables (such as age), characteristics like IQ and mental health/psychopathology and social competence did not vary between arsonists and violent offenders. Other studies, however, do report differences between these groups; like arsonists being more often single, lower educated, showing a less stable employment record, more alcohol abuse problems, and poorer emotional/self-regulation, social and relational skills.

These similarities and differences have led to the hypothesis that arson could be a more advanced stage of antisocial behavior instead of a unique syndrome. If such is the case, this could imply that arsonists benefit from a similar treatment as violent offenders. Thus, in the present study arsonists and violent offenders were compared to shed more light on their potential resemblance. The research group was composed of clients from a Dutch forensic outpatient treatment center, which offers therapy for juveniles (12-18 years) and adults with criminal tendencies. The study sample consisted of 55 arsonists and 41 violent offenders, all male.

Based on previous literature, it was expected that the two groups of offenders would demonstrate more similarities than differences. This proved to be the case for the main part of the fifteen studied characteristics (table 1 for an overview): victim of child abuse, impulsivity, anger management problems, instability of partner relations, problems in the relationship with parents, alcohol abuse/dependency, clinical syndromes (like mood, anxiety and psychotic disorders), cognitive impairment, suicidal thoughts and past mental health treatment. However, five variables differed significantly; arsonists more often displayed PD diagnoses, social isolation, and lack of coping skills, whereas violent offenders showed more drug abuse/dependency and were younger at their first manifestation of antisocial behavior. Further exploring psychopathology, results showed that the arsonists were mostly diagnosed with impulse control disorder (54.5%) and PD not otherwise specified (PD-NOS; 68.2%), with traits of narcissism appearing most frequent (31.8%). In the violent offender sample, the most frequently diagnosed disorders were also impulse control disorder (44.2%) and PD-NOS (76.5%), however, with antisocial traits being most prevalent (43.3%). Four participants (7.3%) in the arsonist sample were diagnosed with pyromania.

Regarding differences in criminal career, violent offenders were significantly more likely to have committed prior offenses (85.4% versus 52.7%) and demonstrated a higher recidivism rate (58.1% versus 47.3%).

Contrary to expectations, the results of this study do provide some evidence for a slightly different approach for psychotherapeutic treatment of arsonists. Given their presumed enhanced social isolation and lack of coping skills, arsonists might benefit from more attention to relational and emotion regulation skills. Moreover, the outcome of predominating narcissistic PD traits could promote a therapy style taking into account the client's vulnerabilities and need for acknowledgment.

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