

The logo consists of the Roman numeral 'IX' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, centered within a dark square background.

CONGRESO
DE PSICOLOGÍA
AMBIENTAL

José A. Corraliza,
Jaime Berenguer
y Rocío Martín
(EDITORES)

Medio Ambiente, Bienestar Humano y Responsabilidad Ecológica

2006

ARSON AND ARSONISTS: RESULTS FROM A STUDY
WITH A PORTUGUESE SAMPLE



RUI ABRUNHOSA GONÇALVES¹
C. SOEIRO²

UNIVERSITY OF MINHO, BRAGA.
SUPERIOR INSTITUTE OF JUDICIARY POLICE AND CRIMINAL SCIENCES, LOURES.

447

ABSTRACT

The authors present data concerning the identification of Portuguese forest arsonists who were serving prison sentences for this crime. These offenders present several psychological features (alcohol abuse, mental illness, psychiatric care, low intelligence,...) and are issued from poor socio-economic backgrounds. No traces of antisocial or psychopathic personality were found. The authors also refer to necessity of taking a closer look to other causes of forest fires, mainly accidental ones, that account for a large proportion of occurrences and show that prevention is not functioning well and negligent behaviors are not considered for punishment, focusing on the importance of an environmental conscience that seems to be far away from the legislations trends on these matters.

Keywords: forest arson, ecological crime.

RESUMEN

Los autores presentan datos relativos a la identificación de incendiarios forestales portugueses que cumplían condena por este delito. Estos delincuentes presentan diversas características psicológicas (alcoholismo, enfermedad mental, atención psiquiátrica, baja inteligencia,...) y proceden de ambientes socioeconómicos pobres. No se encontraron trazas de personalidad antisocial o psicopática. Los autores también hacen referencia a la necesidad de atender a otras causas de los incendios forestales, principalmente las accidentales, que dan cuenta de una gran proporción de incidentes y muestran que la prevención no está funcionando bien y que las conductas negligentes no se castigan, centrandose en la importancia de las consecuencias ambientales que parecen ir más allá de las tendencias legislativas en estas materias.

Palabras clave: incendios forestales, delito ecológico.

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS PAPER we will present some preliminary data of a research project related to the characterization urban and rural arson in Portugal. The results presented only account from a sample of 49 imprisoned arsonists concerning their psychopathy level related to some social and demographic variables and other juridical features.

GOALS AND PROCEDURES

The Portuguese version of the Hare's Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, 1991) was the instrument designed to measure psychopathy. Subjects were 49 males aged from 17 to 61 years ($M = 33.4$; $SD = 12.2$) and serving prison sentences for having committed arsons. The great majority of them (69%) have not gone beyond the basic education level and almost two thirds are single. When they were arrested only 18% were not working on a regular basis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 1 and 2 present respectively the data related to the psychopathy features of the sample, and the relationship between the PCL-R scores obtained by the subjects and other social and juridical features.

Table 1 - Average levels of psychopathy of arsonists obtained through PCL-R scoring.

PCL-R	< 20	20 - 29	30	TOTAL
M	7.8	23.0	32.0	9.8
SD	4.9	3.2	-	7.4
N	43	5	1	49
%	87.8	10.2	2.0	100

Following Hare's recommendations the PCL-R scores were grouped in three levels (non-psychopaths: score < 20; mild-psychopaths: scores between 20 and 29; and psychopaths: scores > 29). Only one subject is considered to be psychopath while five fall in the middle category and the great majority (nearly 90%) are not psychopaths. PCL-R's total average score is 9.8 ($SD = 7.4$). This result in comparison with a sample of imprisoned Portuguese criminals reported in other study (e.g., Gonçalves, 1999), demonstrates the low prevalence of psychopathy in Portuguese arsonists (see figure 1) which may be an interesting feature to consider given the notion that arson's behavior may be triggered by mental disorders or conduct problems (see Barker, 1994, for a review).

Figure 1 - Average PCL-R scores in different types of crimes. Figures in parentheses indicate the number of subjects in each group.

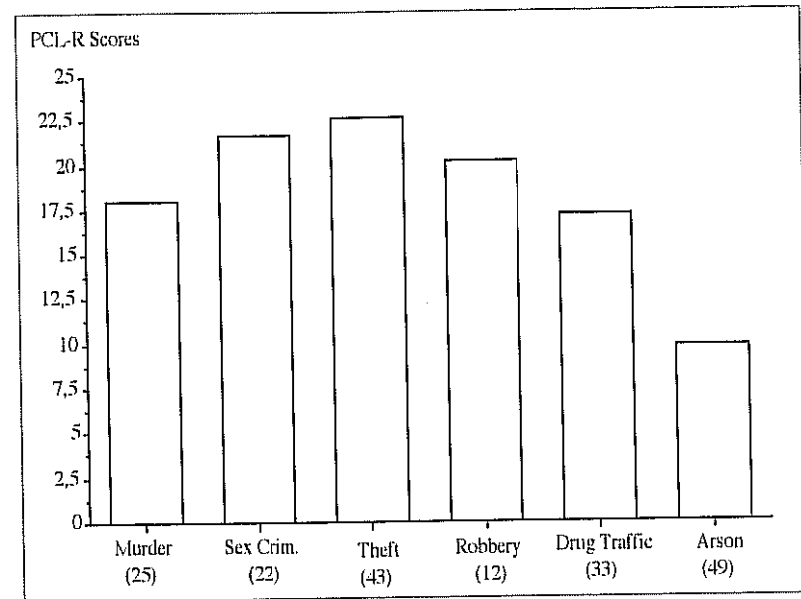


Table 2 presents the results of an one-way anova between the PCL-R scores and other variables that characterize the sample. Significant association effects were only found in three variables, with higher scores of psychopathy being associated with: 1) having more academic education, 2) committing arsons in urban areas, and 3) being a drug abuser.

It is generally accepted that psychopaths may be more intelligent than the average criminals and even attend superior academic and social status (e.g., Babiak, 1996; Hare, 1993). Also, one could explain their preference for urban arsons because they tend to live in urban areas where more opportunities for excitement and risk taking are present comparing to rural regions (e.g., Cooke, 1997). Finally, the co-occurrence of a substance abuse disorder with the diagnosis of psychopathy is very common (e.g., Hare, 1991; Smith & Newman, 1990).

A significant effect was also found between urban arson and drug abuse ($F = 7.83$; $p = .0075$), unemployment ($F = 4.1$; $p = .0485$), and being older ($M = 39.5$) than the forest arsonists ($M = 30.94$) ($F = 5.36$; $p = .0251$).

Table 2 - Relationships between sample variables and average scores of psychopathy measured by the Psychopathy Checklist -Revised (PCL-R; Hare 1991).

VARIABLES	PCL-R M	PCL-R SD	F	p	OBS.
AGE					
25 (n = 12)	10.3	9.2			
26-35 (n = 22)	9.9	7.0	.14	.9362	—
36-45 (n = 7)	10.6	5.9			
> 45 (n = 8)	8.4	7.6			
ACADEMIC GRADE					
4th gr. (n = 34)	7.2	5.5			
6th gr. (n = 8)	16.7	8.5	9.6	.0003	Signif.
> 6th gr. (n = 7)	14.9	7.5			
CIVIL STATUS					
Single (n = 32)	9.7	7.0	.02	.8795	—
Married (n = 17)	10.1	8.1			
JOB STATUS					
Employed (n = 40)	9.7	7.0	.14	.7122	—
Unemployed (n = 9)	10.7	9.3			
ARSON TYPE					
Forest (n = 35)	8.1	6.1	7.4	.0093	Signif.
Urban (n = 14)	14.1	8.7			
RECIDIVISM					
Yes (n = 10)	12.6	8.2	1.8	.186	—
No (n = 39)	9.1	7.1			
MENTAL RETARD					
Presence (n = 9)	7.8	5.5	1.04	.313	1 missing value
Absence (n = 39)	10.5	7.7			
LEARNING PROBLEMS					
Presence (n = 21)	9.2	6.4	.77	.3841	4 missing values
Absence (n = 24)	11.2	8.3			
ALCOHOL ABUSE					
Presence (n = 19)	9.2	6.8	.33	.5677	2 missing values
Absence (n = 28)	10.5	8.0			
DRUG ABUSE					
Presence (n = 5)	21.0	8.5	16.6	.0002	Signif. 1 missing value
Absence (n = 43)	8.6	6.2			
FAMILY VIOLENCE					
Presence (n = 21)	10.4	7.9	.06	.8039	2 missing values
Absence (n = 26)	9.9	7.0			

In sum, looking for the role that psychopathy may play in explaining arson it seems that urban fires tend to be set more by adult persons who present psychopathic features and who also are engaged in drug abuse, and who are more often unemployed, while forest arsonists will more probably be young adults workers who would not present psychopathy features but alcohol abuse problems.

FINAL REMARKS

The data and the results presented in this paper, concerning 49 subjects, cannot be considered as definitive. However, regarding the presence of psychopaths, in comparison with other types of crimes arson is the one which presents the lowest incidence of this disorder. On the other hand, as we are aware that in Portugal the problem with arsonists is mainly in rural/forest areas while psychopaths tend to move to the big cities where drugs and excitement are more common, efforts may be joined to improve surveillance among habitual substance abusers in either environments. On the other hand, attention should be paid to reckless behavior that is one of the principal causes of forest fires among us.

NOTE

1. This research was supported by a grant (Project PEAM/C/IF/0008/97) from the Ministry of Science and Technology and the National Commission for the Study of Forest Fires of Portugal

REFERENCES

- Babiak, P. (1996). Psychopathic manipulation in organizations: pawns, patrons and patsies. In David J. Cook, Adelle E. Forth, Joseph Newman and Robert Hare (Eds.), *International perspectives on psychopathy*, 12-17. London: The British Psychological Society.
- Barker, A. F. (1994). Arson: A review of the psychiatric literature. *Maudsley Monographs*. Institute of Psychiatry: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Cooke, D. J. (1997). Psychopaths: Oversexed, overplayed but not over here? *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 7, 3-11.
- Gonçalves, R. A. (1999). Psychopathy and offender types. Results from a Portuguese prison sample. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 22, 337-346.
- Gorenstein, E. E. & Newman, J. P. (1980). Disinhibitory psychopathology: A new perspective and a model for research. *Psychological Review*, 87, 301-315.
- Hare, R. D. (1991). *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist-Revised*. Toronto: Multi Health Systems.
- Hare, R. D. (1993). *Without conscience. The disturbing world of the psychopaths among us*. N. Y.: Pocket Books.