

# Guest editorial

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## Firesetting special edition

Welcome to this special edition of the *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice (JCRPP)*. This issue focuses on recent developments in the field of firesetting. The past decade has seen significant advances in the psychological and criminological understanding of firesetting (sometimes also referred to as arson within the literature). For example, the multi-factorial theory of adult fire setting (the *M-TTAF*; Gannon and Ó'Ciardha *et al.*, 2012) has been hugely influential as a basis for research and clinical practice. There has also been progress in the treatment of firesetters (Tyler *et al.*, 2018), and a self-report measure has been developed to assist with the assessment of fire-specific psychological characteristics (Ó'Ciardha *et al.*, 2015). More recently still, a broader lens has been applied to explore fire *use*, to include fire-related behaviour, which could be described as adaptive or non-criminalised (Horsley, 2020, 2021, 2022). Published work in the past few years has also explored the classification of firesetting (Tyler and Gannon, 2021), and there has been a call for more multi-disciplinary work to understand the human–fire relationship (Horsley, 2022).

Whilst the aforementioned advances are encouraging, our understanding of firesetting and fire use is incomplete. Furthermore, there are a number of common themes in the existing literature (as highlighted by Horsley, 2022), which means that the research agenda is at risk of becoming repetitive without moves to “break the mould”. My primary objective for this edition was to identify novel research that moves the field on. Before introducing each of the contributions, I will provide an overview of the gaps in understanding, which this special edition seeks to address:

- Most empirical research is based on apprehended firesetters (Barrowcliffe and Gannon, 2015), i.e. those residing in prisons or forensic hospital settings. This is problematic because arson has a poor detection rate (Daykin and Hamilton, 2011), meaning that many people who set fires will never find themselves in custody. There is, therefore, a need for more community-based research (Horsley, 2022).
- There has been progress in understanding the role of cognition in firesetting research over the past decade (for example, Ó'Ciardha and Gannon, 2012; Butler and Gannon, 2021). However, we know very little about the origin of such cognitions. For example, how and when do beliefs about fire form? How do people *learn* to use fire, and how is this influenced by their early experiences?
- The treatment of those who set fires is in its infancy. Encouragingly, there has been a shift away from the “one size fits all” approach (Horsley, 2022) and efforts are now being focused on developing interventions which are tailored to the needs of firesetters specifically (Tyler *et al.*, 2018). However, we should still be striving to learn more about “what works”.
- Connected with the previous point, rehabilitative interventions are surely only one part of a much larger and more complex picture in terms of how to reduce firesetting. Most existing treatment programmes are designed for those who have already committed firesetting crimes. I suggest that the same attention should be paid to the development and refinement of community-based intervention programmes. As outlined in Horsley

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(2022), currently, fire and rescue services (FRSs) are largely responsible for the delivery of such initiatives, but there is little evidence of joined-up thinking on the matter from a national perspective as highlighted by Foster (this edition).

Having outlined gaps in the existing literature, I am delighted to introduce the six empirical papers contained within this special edition.

The first paper – by Barrowcliffe *et al.* – focuses on the prevalence of juvenile firesetting in the community and compares firesetters and non-firesetters on a range of demographic, historical and psychological factors. In their sample of 240 participants, the researchers achieved an almost equal split between males and females. This improves on much of the existing research, which has typically drawn upon all-male or mostly male participant pools. Not only does this paper address the need for more community-based research by using an un-apprehended sample but also speaks to another gap in the literature, namely, understanding more about the type of relationships young people form with fire. This paper highlights some of the potential risk factors for un-apprehended firesetting and, thus, has important practical application.

The second paper – by Rhodes and Tyler – makes an exciting contribution by addressing the dearth of knowledge on fire learning in young people in a non-criminalised context. Conducted in New Zealand, the findings of this qualitative survey-based study highlight the importance of parental modelling, reinforcement and sensory experiences in how people learn about and experience fire. More specifically, the themes identified relate to the fire learning process and to thoughts and feelings about fire in adulthood. This is one of the first studies of its kind and has clear practical application. As the authors astutely point out, understanding more about the influence of early fire-related experiences on later fire use plays a crucial role in developing strategies for firesetting prevention.

The third paper – by Horsley *et al.* – connects well with the work of Rhodes and Tyler. This quantitative survey-based study explores the influence of exposure to anti-social fire use in childhood on fire-related behaviour, implicit bias to fire and fire attitudes and beliefs in adulthood. Findings reveal that those exposed to anti-social fire use as children are more likely to engage in criminalised fire-related behaviour as adults. Like the Rhodes and Tyler paper, this provides a valuable insight into how early experiences can influence later interactions with fire. Findings could inform firesetting prevention strategies. More specifically, this work could influence the screening of young people for targeted firesetting programmes and illuminates the potential importance of involving parents and caregivers.

Together, the fourth and fifth papers – both by Pearson *et al.* – present a sequential evaluation of an educational programme for adult firesetters. The papers concern the Firesetters' Integrated Responsive Educational Programme (FIRE-P), a structured intervention developed by Hampshire FRS, which (at the time of writing) was delivered in Hampshire and on the Isle of Wight. The programme runs either on a one-to-one basis or in small groups and receives most of its referrals from the Probation Service. The fourth paper – an outcome evaluation – measures the effectiveness of the FIRE-P in terms of recidivism. The fifth paper – a process evaluation – is a qualitative analysis of participants' experiences of the FIRE-P. The two papers address the aforementioned need for more research into “what works” with firesetters in terms of reducing recidivism. More specifically, they provide an insight into the type of community-based interventions available, which could pave the way for similar approaches to be developed elsewhere in the UK.

Whereas Pearson *et al.* focus on an intervention delivered by one FRS, the sixth paper – by Foster – presents the current national picture by examining the work of FRSs across the UK. In fact, in this survey-based study, Foster achieved an impressive 100% response rate, and so the findings represent every UK FRS (53 in total). This study is the first of its kind and lays the foundations for what I believe is a top priority area for further research, namely, the current

provision for young people from a firesetting prevention perspective and, importantly, how this can be improved. Foster examines the FRS interventions currently delivered and, importantly, how services identify the young people most in need of psychosocial intervention. Foster makes a series of valuable recommendations which could significantly influence policy.

It has been a pleasure to compile this collection of exciting, novel and contemporary research. This special edition of the JRCPP addresses notable gaps in the literature and explores new directions. Owing to the many recent advancements, at the present time, there is a palpable momentum in the field of firesetting research. Now – to coin an apt phrase – we must strike while the iron is hot and I hope that this issue inspires new researchers to do just that.

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## Further reading

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