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Crime after Lockdown: Anticipating the Effects of Exit Strategies

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The problem

The UK government's Covid-19 lockdown strategy has had a dramatic effect on crime. How best can we anticipate and respond to changes in crime as lockdown is lifted?

What we know about the impact of lockdown on crime and how we know it

Restrictions on people's movements have caused dramatic changes in crime opportunities. Many crime types from shoplifting to burglary have declined, while others including domestic violence and online crimes (from fraud to child sexual abuse) have increased.

Perhaps the most obvious is the two-thirds declines in shoplifting when most shops have been closed, but stay-at-home orders have meant many homes have more guardianship which is linked to residential burglary reductions of around a quarter. The release of the COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports by Google has allowed physical movements to be directly compared to crime changes in the same areas, one study proposing a 'mobility theory of crime in the pandemic' (Halford et al. 2020).

'Virtual mobility' has also changed because of increased remote working and online leisure activities as people, including children home from school, move more and more activities online. The virtual world effect is, broadly speaking, in the opposite direction to the physical world and has created new crime opportunities.

What we think might happen as lockdown is lifted

Crimes that decreased under lockdown are discussed first and then crimes that have increased. The models are simplifications of what may happen as lockdown lifts. Clearly the effects identified here will vary depending on how exit strategies are introduced, such as, whether they are sudden, prolonged and graduated, or cyclical.

Crimes that decreased during lockdown: Table 1 overleaf summarises a set of generic models of the potential outcomes upon crimes that have decreased during the pandemic. The specifics will vary by type of crime and local context. The aim is to promote thinking about potential effects and, thereby, what might be done to reduce overall crime harms.

Crimes that increased during lockdown: Exit strategies are likely to have very different effects, perhaps often the opposite, on crimes that increased during lockdown. The issues are not necessarily as straightforward because online crimes may adjust differently, particularly if remote working and online activities continue at higher levels than before the pandemic: here there is a need for longer-term strategies. Table 2 overleaf summarises these models.

Table 1: Types of Effect of Exit Strategies upon Crimes that Decreased under Lockdown

Model	Effect	Impact
L shape	Crime is kept at low levels (due to consolidation efforts promoted by policy and practice) – (the opposite of an upward ratchet effect)	Positive <-----------------------> Negative
U shape	Crime remains at lower levels for some time but gradually returns to pre-pandemic levels	
W shape	Further covid-19 spikes cause re-introduction of movement restrictions, with crime rates responding in turn	
Local W	Local covid-19 outbreaks cause varying and intermittent local lockdowns, local crime rates varying in return	
V shape	Crime bounces back quickly to pre-pandemic levels	
J shape	Crime bounces back to rates *higher* than before the pandemic, as offenders *make up for lost crime*	

Table 2: Types of Effect of Exit Strategies upon Crimes that Increased under Lockdown

Model	Effect	Impact
Λ-shape	The Λ-shape (pronounced 'caret-shape') is a positive scenario with crimes that increased quickly declining to pre-pandemic levels	Positive <-- ---------------> Negative
n-shape	The n-shape is positive, with crime remaining higher for some time but then returns to pre-pandemic levels	
M-shape	Crimes decrease with exist strategies but then increase in response to further mobility restrictions with new covid-19 spikes	
Local-M	Local covid-19 outbreaks cause varying and intermittent local lockdowns, local crime rates varying in return	
r-shape	The r-shape or ratchet effect model is negative because crimes that increased do not decline – they have 'ratcheted' upwards.	
Steps	The step-shape model is negative because crimes that increased continue to do so in a stepwise (or other, including linear) increase	

Some ideas in response

What should be done to minimise the potential unintended harms of exit strategies? Broadly speaking, the aims of policy and practice should be to (a) consolidate declines in crime that occurred under lockdown; and (b) encourage declines in crimes that increased under lockdown.

Agencies need to try to distinguish the type of outcome that is likely as lockdown is eased. This will inform the development of anticipatory strategy to tackle the changing crime landscape. This may require rapid responses if particular types of crime flare up. If local movement restrictions vary in response to localised covid-19 outbreaks, this will require different responses in different places. Crime-specific measures are needed, because different types of crime have reacted differently in different contexts.

Local, national and international communication networks are needed to identify good practice and promising practice, to promote rapid assessment of effects, and disseminate information quickly. Time is of the essence if we are to retain the benefits and shake-off the inadvertent crime harms of covid-19 policies.