

Types of crime change in the pandemic

Graham Farrell¹
University of Leeds
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The problem

Different crimes have changed in different ways in the pandemic. It's difficult to keep track! Grouping them into broad categories with things in common can help in different ways. It can help organise our thinking. And the groups can provide insight into how we might go about developing practical responses relating to different types of crimes that have things in common.

What we know about crime change in the pandemic and how we know it

There is strong evidence that crime types have changed rapidly and dramatically in the pandemic. They have changed in different ways depending on crime type, time and place. They are continuing to change as the pandemic and our response to it evolves. Lockdowns, and related mobility restrictions relating to social distancing, have had a dramatic effect on both physical and online crimes. Assaults and public disorder crimes declined in the UK as restrictions on pubs, restaurants and public entertainment areas were introduced from 20 March. Shoplifting plummeted when non-essential shops were closed from 23 March. Online or virtual 'mobility' increased with increased remote working, schooling and leisure activities. The way that some crimes are committed has changed in the pandemic: fraud has been facilitated by the new 'conversation starter' offered by the pandemic on issues relating to furloughs, medicines, vaccine trials, insurance, and so on, as well as new opportunities for counterfeit goods. In the pandemic, some products have become scarce which means their prices rise, making their theft (or robbery) more attractive. And the volume of recorded anti-social behaviour increased dramatically, likely due to the reporting of actual and perceived lockdown breaches plus increased waste-related crimes. This evidence-based platform is the basis for the groupings below.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

By mid-2020 it looks like the pandemic will continue nationally and internationally for a considerable time - perhaps years, absent a vaccine - with seasonal and spatial variation in cases. The UK introduced its first 'local lockdown' in the city of Leicester on 30 June 2020, and local lockdowns may become the 'new norm' as COVID flare-ups occur in different places. We need to keep thinking about how different policies will affect crime, to develop anticipatory responses.

So, this *Briefing* section sets out preliminary groupings or types of effect on crime. The grouping used here is probably not definitive. It wouldn't stand the scrutiny of a specialised crime taxonomist. It is suggested as hopefully 'good enough', for now, to inform practical thinking about developing responses. So even though the groups overlap in places and do not divide perfectly by causal mechanism, it is hoped that the practical aspects outweigh the limitations. And if this prompts someone else to propose a better typology, all the better!

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Some ideas in response

The grouping in the table below is meant as an aid to strategic thinking for the development of practical responses. Of course, grouping everything into a few categories, risks missing the crime-specific details that are so important to inform responses. But it encourages higher-level strategic thinking about what responses have in common across crimes. For example, responses linked to mobility restrictions may affect a group of crimes, as may responses linked to products in markets that have changed. It should promote strategic thinking about anticipatory responses and what will happen next.

Table 1: Types of crime change in the pandemic

Category	Examples
<p>1. Physical mobility (movement restrictions)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reduced crime opportunities</i> • <i>Increased crime opportunities</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theft, robbery, assault, public disorder, criminal damage etc. • Domestic abuse; child abuse in home.
<p>2. Virtual mobility (increased online activity - remote work, school, leisure, shopping etc. – reflects movement restriction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Existing cybercrimes facilitated</i> • <i>New forms of cybercrime facilitated</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More available suitable targets online for existing crimes • Cybercrimes, esp. vulnerable people (incl. elderly, disabled), online child sexual abuse; online bullying; exposure to terrorist propaganda.
<p>3. New means of commission (modus operandi)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Facilitation of existing crimes</i> • <i>Facilitation of new crime forms</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fraud online/offline. Furlough fraud. Fake medical products • Bio-assault (cough, spit, touch, threats, incl. terrorism)
<p>4. Product markets and prices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Health-related crimes made more attractive</i> • <i>Non health-related crimes made more attractive</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theft and counterfeits of pandemic medical products (medicines, PPE, facemasks) • Goods in short supply – theft, price-gouging.
<p>5. Civil law breaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breach of lockdown restrictions • Crime provoked by COVID-related law change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lockdown breaches; Meeting limits; No-mask • Fly-tipping (increased as refuse tips closed)

Relevant resources

- Ashby, M. 2020. [Initial evidence on the relationship between the coronavirus pandemic and crime in the United States](#), *Crime Science*, 9(6): 1-16.
- Dixon, A, E. Sheard and G. Farrell. (2020). [National Recorded Crime Trends, Statistical Bulletin on Crime and COVID-19 Issue 1](#). Leeds: University of Leeds.
- Farrell, G. and D. Birks. 2020. [Crime after lockdown: Anticipating the effects of exit strategies](#), UCL Jill Dando Institute COVID-19 Special Papers series #19. London: University College London.
- Halford, E., A. Dixon, G. Farrell, N. Malleson, N. Tilley. 2020. [Coronavirus and crime: Social distancing, lockdown and the mobility elasticity of crime](#)’ *Crime Science*, 9(11); 1-12.

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>