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Coronavirus and crime

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**Coronavirus and Crime:
Fact file 2**

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In brief



The scope and nature of crime in the UK has seen a dramatic change over the past few months. As the world struggles to adapt to the new ways of life that the containment of Covid-19 has required, we have seen demonstrable shifts in the patterns and typology of criminal activity. Indeed, whilst overall crime rates have shown to be falling, and falling fast (Dodd & Pidd, 2020; Farrell & Tilley, 2020), certain crimes have seen a dramatic and worrying rise.



One of the most prevalent trends has been the rise in cases of **online fraud, and in particular, internet scams**. Europol (2020, p.4) report the impact of the pandemic on cybercrime has been “the most visible and striking compared to other criminal activities”. Preying on people’s vulnerabilities and anxieties, (particularly around financial insecurity, and health and safety concerns), many individuals have fallen victim to a range of costly scams. These have included, fraudulent sales of Personal Protective Equipment, the advertisement of false coronavirus ‘treatment kits’ (Choi, 2020), and succumbing to the lure of fraudsters posing as banks, government officials, and health service providers, all designed to persuade victims to release passwords and other personal data (White & Cruise, 2020). The national fraud and cybercrime reporting body, Action Fraud, estimate that since the start of the outbreak, financial losses to victims have exceeded £1.6 million (Townsend, 2020). Of note, Director of the Centre for Counter Fraud Studies (CCFS) at the University of Portsmouth, Professor Mark Button, has warned existing preventative measures need to be ‘urgently reviewed’ to deal with the scale of this current rise in fraud (Melton, 2020).



The UK has also seen a significant rise in **child abuse, in particular online sexual abuse**. Childline and the NSPCC have both reported increased demand for their helplines, while police chiefs have suggested some individuals may be seeking to exploit the coronavirus crisis to cause harm online (Grierson, 2020a). Concerns have also been raised internationally. India, for example, reported a significant escalation in online searches for indecent images of children, with a steep increase in searches for “child porn”, “sexy child” and “teen sex videos” (Bose, 2020). Spain and Denmark have also reported increases in complaints of child sexual exploitation material (Europol, 2020). The response in the UK has seen a group of cross-party MPs call for increased funding for children’s helplines to tackle this growing problem (Grierson, 2020a).



Another notable upward trend has been in **incidents of domestic abuse and domestic killings**. As noted by Dame Vera Baird QC in a report released this month on children’s experiences of domestic abuse and criminality (Wedlock & Molina, 2020, p.3), lockdown measures, whilst containing the spread of the virus, “present an unprecedented risk for victims of domestic abuse”. Compelled as they are to remain within their home, their risk of abuse from a partner or family member is considerably heightened. Indeed, both Refuge and The National Domestic Abuse Helpline have seen a surge in calls since the lockdown began, with traffic on their websites increasing exponentially. Of most concern, Karen Ingala Smith’s site, Counting Dead Women, has noted 16 domestic abuse killings in the three-week period between late March and early April 2020 (14 women and 2 children). This has meant an average of five domestic killings per week, compared with two per week, as has been the average over the previous 10 years (Grierson, 2020b).



The crimes described thus far have documented criminal activity that is both known and established. However, the advent of this pandemic, (and its associated countrywide lockdowns), has meant the **rise of a new category of crime**. As police powers have increased **under the authority of the new Coronavirus (COVID-19) Action Plan, 'normal' every day behaviours have become criminalised**. As such, a surge in new crime typologies have emerged, each with their own requisite penalties and punishments. Indeed, over the past months, the UK has seen the use of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) and arrests for breaking the new 'social distancing' rules. We have also seen the beginnings of a new type of violent crime, that of deliberate infections. Indeed, there have already been several cases of individuals being prosecuted for using coronavirus to threaten emergency and essential workers (Casciani, 2020; Dunn, 2020; Tidman, 2020), with the act now being classified as an offence (CPS, 2020).



However, though the intention to deliberately infect others will likely be understood as requiring a police response, the law enforcement approach for every day 'transgressions' has brokered criticism. For example, South Yorkshire Police recently had cause to apologise for disallowing a family to use their own front garden (Stubley, 2020), Greater Manchester Police apologised for arresting a man for allegedly breaching the lockdown by moving a tree for his mother (Slater, 2020), and Derbyshire Police were heavily criticised for taking drone footage of ramblers and dog walkers in the Peak District (Merrick, 2020). The backlash has seen the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) clarify arrests and fines for breaking lockdown rules should only be used as a "last resort", with a preference to "engage, explain and encourage" people to follow the new public health regulations (Dearden, 2020a).



All this has interesting implications for probation. Indeed, with rises in cases of domestic abuse, child sexual abuse and fraud along with increasing numbers of individuals being criminalised for previously non-criminal acts, it is important to consider what types of crimes and 'criminals' probation services might see come through their doors in the coming months and years.

- Domestic abuse?
- Online sexual Exploitation material?
- Fraud and scams?
- Antisocial behaviour related to social distancing laws?
- Malicious spitting and coughing on essential workers?

A national picture



Violent crime down 40% in parts of Britain as a result of restrictions on people's movement (Hymas, 2020).



In **England and Wales crime is down 28%** from the four weeks to 12 April, **compared with same period last year**; 27% drop in vehicle crime, serious assault and personal robbery, and recorded rape offences have fallen 37%. (Shaw, 2020).



Crime in Scotland **down by 25%** (BBC News, 2020b).



Durham reported **20% drop in crime** in late March, with an average of 130 crimes a day versus 165 the previous week (Dodd & Pidd, 2020).



Compared to March 2019, **West Midlands** saw **41% fall in serious violence, a 39% drop in knife crime** during March this year (Hymas, 2020) and **31% drop in burglaries** (Farrington, 2020).



Stabbings and violent crime have "dropped considerably" in **London** (Dearden, 2020b).



Avon and Somerset recorded an average daily **273 crimes** in mid-April, **a drop from 470** the previous month (Sumner, 2020, with **Devon and Cornwall** recording a fall from **150 average daily crimes to just 50** (Corbin, 2020).

However.... In the last four weeks to April 15th, **there were 178,000 incidents of anti-social behaviour across England and Wales - a rise of 59%** on last year (Shaw, 2020). (See page 7 for more details).



Crime typologies during coronavirus: Online fraud and scams

- City of London Police reported a **400% increase in scams** in March (Bevan, 2020).
- **Fraud has increased by more than 10% in Scotland** between 24 March and 19 April (BBC News, 2020b).
- Between 11 and 14 April, 23 **fake HMRC emails** were reported to Action Fraud, and between 8 and 16 April, there were **131 reports** of individuals being sent a **fake “GOV.UK” email** (Goodman, 2020).
- Upwards of **700 fake websites** mimicking Netflix and Disney+ signup pages have been created to **harvest personal information** (Sweeney 2020).
- On 27 March, Europol reported a large increase in **online crimes exploiting heightened anxieties** around health and safety (Europol, 2020), with cons involving fake treatments, illegal sanitiser and bogus safety masks (Choi, 2020).
- **Scams have cost victims over £800k** in February 2020 (Action Fraud, 2020), with **total losses of over £1.6 million** since start of outbreak (Townsend, 2020b).

Crime typologies during coronavirus: Domestic abuse and killings*

- The **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** (NDAH) recorded a **120% increase** in calls received in one 24 hour period during the early stages of lockdown (White, 2020).
- From February to March, **traffic to the NDAH website increased by 156%** (Birchley 2020).
- **Refuge reported a 700% increase in calls to its helpline** in a single day (Townsend, 2020a).
- Between 23 March and 12 April, **14 women were killed by men**; this is the highest it has been during this period **for 11 years** (Ingala Smith, 2020).

*For a detailed account of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 Pandemic, including international trends, see [KSS Research and Policy Unit's Factfile \(1\) Domestic Abuse During Coronavirus \(Musimbe-Rix, 2020\)](#)

Crime typologies during coronavirus: Online child sexual abuse



- National Crime Agency (NCA) suggest **300,000 sex abusers pose a threat**, with some discussing how to exploit the school shutdown (Brunt, 2020).
- 10% of schoolchildren claim they can do as they want online while they are housebound (Brunt, 2020).
- Europol reported a **significant increase in child exploitation** due to millions of children spending more time online (Vinocur, 2020).
- **17% rise in live-streaming amongst children since school closures**, more than one in five **'broadcasters' chatting to strangers online** (Walker, 2020).
- **Thames Valley** Police said it had received **64 reports** of online child sexual abuse **in March compared to 26 for the same month in 2019**. (BBC News, 2020c).



Crime typologies during coronavirus: A new brand of criminality

- **9,176 fines for alleged breaches of coronavirus lockdown laws** were issued in England and Wales between 27 March and 13 April (ITV News, 2020).
- Over the Easter weekend, more than **100 fines were issued by Sussex Police** to day-trippers travelling to Brighton (BBC News, 2020a), with 348 in total as of 30th April (Sussex Police).
- In Warrington, by 6 March 2020, **six people had been summonsed to court for coronavirus-related offences**, such as “out for a drive due to boredom” and “going to the shops for non-essential items” (Dearden, 2020a)
- On 9 April, 2020, The Crown Prosecution Service released **a snapshot of cases prosecuted for coronavirus related crimes:**
 - Five for spitting or coughing on essential workers
 - Two for breaching restrictions on movements
 - One for posting pictures of an unauthorised visit to a hospital on social media (CPS,2020)
- **In Brighton, two men have been jailed** for the assault of emergency workers:
 - One was jailed for 12 weeks for spitting at officers while claiming to be infected with coronavirus
 - Another was jailed for 38 weeks for spitting at police officers, a security guard and a member of the public, “during a period of Covid-19” (Sussex Police).

Crime during coronavirus: Support and advice



Keeping children safe online

- [National Crime Agency \(NCA\):Thinkuknow](#)
- [NSPCC: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and keeping children safe from abuse](#)
- [Government guidance: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): support for parents and carers to keep children safe online](#)



Domestic abuse

- [National Crime Agency \(NCA\):Thinkuknow](#)
- [NSPCC: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and keeping children safe from abuse](#)
- [Government guidance: Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): support for parents and carers to keep children safe online](#)



Fraud and scams

- [Citizens Advice: Report a scam](#)
- [Victim Support: Fraud](#)
- [Action Fraud](#)

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