

Crime, Criminal Justice, and the COVID-19 Crisis Lockdown: A Special Issue Introduction

Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice
2021, Vol. 37(4) 476–479
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DOI: 10.1177/10439862211061887
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The seven articles included in this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* analyze the impact of the COVID-19 crisis lockdowns on crime and criminal justice–related issues in Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Paraguay, Panama, Mexico, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom. They cover a full range of subjects, from methodology to the empirical trends observed in different types of crimes, including those “created” as a consequence of the pandemic, passing through the risk of discrimination in the health and criminal justice systems.

In particular, three articles use the routine activities approach, developed by Cohen and Felson in 1979, as their main theoretical framework. In that perspective, the lockdowns dramatically reduced the risk of convergence in time and in the public space of potential offenders and victims in the absence of capable guardians; conversely, they increased the risk of convergence of the same elements in the private sphere and in the cyberspace. Theoretically, it is hence plausible to hypothesize that, during the lockdowns, offline crime in the public space would decrease, offline crime in the private sphere would increase, and online crime would also increase. This is the premise of the articles by Aebi et al. (2021), Kemp et al. (2021), and Iesue et al. (2021) that study trends in different crimes before, during, and after the lockdowns. Kemp et al. (2021) concentrate on fraud and cybercrime in the United Kingdom, Iesue et al. (2021) on domestic violence in Guatemala, and Aebi et al. (2021) on femicide in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Panama, Mexico, and Spain.

The results partially support the hypotheses formulated above. The devil is in the details. Yes, in the United Kingdom cybercrime and cyber-enabled fraud increased during the lockdowns, but the trends differed considerably according to the kind of victims (organizations or individuals) and the type of fraud, especially cyber-enabled frauds related to activities in the physical space (Kemp et al., 2021). Yes, nonlethal domestic violence registered an overall increase when the unit of analysis is the whole Guatemala, but there are several exceptions when the units of analyses are the different departments of the country (Iesue et al., 2021). But no, femicide did not increase in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Panama, Mexico, and Spain (Aebi et al., 2021). These results challenge the apocalyptic view of the pandemic’s consequences on crime portrayed by the mass media and supported by some experts. They also show the importance of the situation in which crimes take place, while highlighting at the same time the limitations of a theoretical approach based only on that aspect. In that context,

Aebi et al. (2021) propose three lines of research to improve our theoretical and empirical knowledge on femicides.

The previous three articles take for granted that the lockdowns were effectively enforced, but Leal et al. (2021) raise the question of whether that was the case in the city of San Antonio, Texas, the United States. In fact, the public health restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic are a stereotypical example of the way in which crime is socially constructed. A new law introduces new and temporary types of offenses, and this has an effect not only on crime rates, but also on the general functioning of society. For example, who is calling the police to complain about the nonrespect of these offenses? Leal et al. (2021) found that violations of the new offenses were concentrated in specific locations, that these locations varied during the period under study, and that the violations were enforced by several agencies whose involvement also varied during that period. The authors also found a progressive decrease in the percentage of calls that effectively led to a citation, raising questions about how the calls were effectively dealt with by the enforcement agencies as time went by and the economic consequences of the pandemic became evident. In the background of these findings, the reader can distinguish a classic dilemma between a harm reduction approach and a pure law enforcement one, exemplified by the police officers who, in the middle of a manifestation, did not conduct interpellations but provided manifestants with free face coverings. These results should also raise questions about the impact of the discourse of public officials on the legitimacy of the restrictions imposed. For example, which are the consequences of the public position of a governor toward the restrictions, or which are the consequences of condoning the payment of the fines imposed?

Similarly, what happens to the citizens of a country living abroad when their country is designated by public officials and by part of the press as responsible for the pandemic? This is the question studied by Gray and Hansen (2021) who observed an increase of hate crimes toward Chinese people in London immediately after the origin of the pandemic was announced and before the lockdowns. Moreover, after the end of the lockdowns, that specific crime did not decrease to the level observed before the pandemic. This is the kind of finding that raises questions about the responsibility of politicians and journalist on the unattended consequences of their acts.

Minorities are also the focus of the study of Hughes and Prior (2021) who analyze national data on the correctional male population of the United States. Their study corroborates that incarcerated persons have significantly higher rates of chronic diseases than the general population, which can be attributed to a combination of their lifestyle before incarceration (which is linked to higher rates of disadvantage in terms of poverty, education, employment, and other risk factors) coupled with the damaging effects of prison overcrowding. In addition, they found that, after controlling for several of those risk factors, minority males were more likely to be diagnosed with a chronic health condition. Then, they couple their results with those of the spread of COVID-19 among the general population, which show that Black and Hispanic individuals were being diagnosed with COVID-19 at a much greater pace than White individuals.

Ultimately, Hughes and Prior (2021) remind that Black and Hispanic individuals are overrepresented in the prison population of the United States, which allow them to conclude that they are at a higher risk for a COVID-19 diagnosis.

Finally, Wallace et al. (2021) provide a much needed methodological analysis of the enormous amount of data generated around the COVID-19 pandemic. Wallace et al. (2021) treat issues of accuracy, precision, reliability, validity, vagueness, ambiguity, incompleteness, and inconsistency with examples from the data produced in the United States. Nevertheless, their recommendations on how to treat that kind of data (e.g., how the pandemic affected the collection? Are stakeholders involved in the production of the data?) go well beyond the borders of one country and can easily be applied around the world.

In sum, the readers of this special issue on Crime, Criminal Justice, and the COVID-19 Crisis Lockdown of the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* will find in it a good sample of the subjects studied by contemporary criminologists and the impact that the pandemic had on their understanding of crime, criminals, their victims, and the social reaction to it.

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