CORONAVIRUS, CRIME AND POLICING:
Thoughts on the implications of the lockdown rollercoaster

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has had a major impact on societies across the world. While much of the focus has been on the impact on health and financial wellbeing, crime patterns have also been affected. Correspondingly, police systems, policing, and the legal system within which the police operate, have also changed, less because of the changing crime pattern and more as the police have been empowered with policing health. This exploratory discussion looks at how crime and policing have been affected by the pandemic and speculates about the long-term impact when societies return to a new normal.

Keywords: *COVID-19; crime prevention; changing crime rates; crime patterns; policing health; changes to police systems; lifestyle and crime; routine activities; policing issues*

Introduction

The coronavirus now recognised as COVID-19 was first identified in the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in late 2019 and spread across the globe in 2020, with epicentres in European countries, initially Italy and Spain, then France and the UK. Reacting to the threat, the WHO recommended a range of measures to limit the spread of the virus. These measures were adopted, to varying degrees, by different governments and, at their ex-

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treme, became known as lockdowns. In enforcing the lockdowns, governments turned to education campaigns and appeals to citizens to act responsibly, but in most cases, this was backed up by legislation, with the role of the police central in enforcing the 'new normal'. In many cases these lockdowns applied nationwide, but in other cases they have been enforced differently in different regions within countries. As COVID-19 subsequently spread through Africa and America, the situation in much of Europe eased, leading to some partial easing of lockdowns. However, at the time of going to press (October 2020) there is strong evidence of a second spike across Europe, leading to the reintroduction of many restrictions, either nationwide or region-specific.

While much of the research on COVID-19 has focused on the health sphere, criminologists and police scientists have addressed the impact of the pandemic on crime and policing. This has led, rather strangely, to a plethora of research studies on the impact of lockdowns on crime, whereas writings on policing tend to be more speculative. This article aims to review the debate to date. However, this is with two provisos. Firstly, it should be noted that it focuses, albeit not exclusively, on UK and English-language-based material. Secondly, it is important to recognise that the pandemic, and legal and policing responses to it, are ongoing, meaning that much of the material, including this article, may be already dated!

That said, the following two sections address the impact of the pandemic and governmental responses: firstly, on crime and disorder and then on policing. In each case, academic and practitioner discourses have been supplemented with media reports. The final section then summarises the findings and speculates on the future.

The impact of COVID-19 on crime rates and crime patterns

The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound effect on the health of nations across the world, crucially on mortality rates, on the health and care systems and on the economy. But it has also impacted on fundamental aspects of our life: how we behave as individuals and as social animals. We have changed our behaviour in a number of ways, as is illustrated through analysis of mapping technologies. [2] There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, some people's activities will be directly affected by the virus, for example if they become ill or are caring for family members who are ill. Secondly, some activities will be affected by people's fear of becoming infected, leading to them *inter alia* staying at home more frequently or relying less on public transport, as a recent YouGov study in the UK shows (Travel Mole, 2020). Finally, people's activities have been influenced by government actions, advisory or mandatory, including school, amenity, shop or business closures, restrictions on travel etc. Of course, there have been variations between coun-

2   See for example: www.apple.com/covid19/mobility accessed 21 July 2020.

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tries in terms of government strategies to combat the pandemic (Godwin, 2020), and citizens' willingness and ability to change their behaviours. That said, in most countries affected by the pandemic people have altered their behaviour significantly, stopped doing many things they usually did and staying at home more, with greater use of the internet. Furthermore, as governments variously took measures to ease the lockdown, lessening restrictions regarding social distancing and travel, patterns of behaviour changed again, albeit not necessarily or immediately back to pre-pandemic routines. And, currently, as further measures are introduced to counter a second wave, actions and reactions are again shifting.

It is therefore unsurprising that crime might be affected: both the propensity to commit crime and the risk of being a victim, and many criminologists have been engaged in assessing crime patterns.

This encouraged academics interested in situational influences on crime patterns to question the impact of changes in mobility on crime rates. For example, UCL (University College London) hosted an online symposium on Crime *and COVID-19* on 16 July and has a webpage dedicated to the subject,[3] and the European Society of Criminology 2020 e-conference devoted a number of sessions to the subject.[4]

The theoretical basis for much of this analysis is derived from routine activity theory (Cohen & Felston, 1979), rational choice theory (Cromwell et al. 1991) and crime pattern theory (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1984). While varying in their emphases, essentially these focus on opportunities: offenders' decisions to target specific property or persons, based on their knowledge and awareness of the target, and the availability and accessibility of an appropriate target.

Three aspects of the situation that make a crime more or less likely - an available victim; a motivated offender; and a lack of protection or guardianship - have been significantly affected by the pandemic, in terms both of individuals' choices and government restrictions. Firstly, the availability of victims was in many respects reduced. People were less likely to out in public, and since entertainment venues were closed, they were especially less likely to go out after dark. They were also less likely to use public transport. This suggests that less victims would be available to steal from (e.g. pickpockets operate best in crowds, especially public transport), and public disorder offences linked to alcohol misuse would be lower. Secondly, potential offenders might have been less likely to go out, especially with co-offenders. Thirdly, there might have been more police around if other policing duties were reduced and if the police were actively enforcing the lockdown. Most

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3   See: https://covid19-crime.com/

4   See: https://e024fbf5-6c7b-4d28-a274-3ea640442f02.filesusr.com/ug-d/7a9c76_507aed46833e4910b299e8dcb85c7c7d.pdf.

importantly though, is the question of self-guardianship and guardianship by passers-by or neighbours (Hollis-Peel & Welsh, 2014; Reynald, 2011). People spent more time at home which meant that their homes were better protected from burglars (who prefer empty houses), and they were better able to act as guardians of neighbours' property. On the other hand, there were less 'guardians' around in public places: less people in city centres meant fewer potential victims and offenders, but also less available witnesses/guardians. Moreover, the closure of many factories, shops and offices in city centres, shopping malls and industrial estates meant that these were potentially 'unguarded' 24/7. Consequently, while we might see a reduction in many offences, other might be more common. Whether this is a matter of displacement (Johnson et al., 2014), i.e. offenders continued to offend but changed their modus operandi, or whether these 'new' crimes were committed by different offenders, is a moot point.

However, alternative theories suggest that crime and disorder may not necessarily decline during lockdown. The fact that people have been restricted in their movements and the financial implications of the closure (permanently or temporarily) of many businesses is considered by strain theorists (Agnew, 1992) to result in increases in crime. Certainly, while not unambiguous, there is evidence that acquisitive crime increases as unemployment rises (Bennett & Quaszd, 2016; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001). Finally, alternative perspectives on COVID-19 and governmental responses, ranging from conspiracy theorists to those advocating herd immunity, combined with regional, ethnic and age-based disparities, have opened up schisms within societies and threatened notions of community solidarity.

Testing out the impact of COVID-19 and legal responses on crime and disorder is, however, fraught with difficulties. Firstly, official statistics are dependent on victims reporting crimes and the police recording them, and in many cases, like domestic violence or internet crime, they may not be reliable because a majority of crimes are not reported or recorded. In these circumstances, criminologists turn to victim survey data, but these are generally unavailable in the short term and in any case may be less useful for measuring changes in crime over short periods. One notable exception is in England and Wales, where a new Telephone-operated Crime Survey (TCSEW) was introduced to measure changes in crime levels after restrictions came into effect on 23 March 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020a). While this uses a somewhat crude before/after comparison based on two-monthly rates, it provides a useful supplement to official statistics. Secondly, up-to-date criminal statistics may be inaccessible. This will vary according to the country and within countries, but there are some ongoing studies in the USA, Australia, Canada and the UK (see below), among others. Thirdly, statistics are sometimes not detailed enough to allow us to identify subtle changes. For example, many police crime statistics fail to distinguish between domestic burglaries and break-ins to business premises. Finally, given

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that crime rates are subject to seasonal variation and may be subject to shifting patterns, it is necessary to include data covering ideally three or more years.

Taking these limitations on board, researchers have found that some offences became less common while a few increased under lockdown.

Burglary is a useful example of changing patterns. Since homes were less likely to be empty at the height of the pandemic, residential burglaries might be expected to decline because burglars tend to target empty property (Mawby, 2001). But burglars who operate when householders are at home, notably distraction burglars (Thornton et al., 2005), may be more active, using the emergency as an excuse to gain access. Furthermore, where shops, offices, schools etc. were closed for longer periods, burglaries of businesses, storage facilities, schools and other public buildings might be expected to increase. These offences traditionally take place at night (Mawby, 2001) but may have become more common in the daytime. Most of the research confirms this. Domestic burglary rates have been found to fall (Ashby, 2020; Halford et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2020), although this did not seem to be the case in Los Angeles (Campedelli, Favarin & Aziani, 2020). In England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics (2020a) also reported a significant decline in household burglaries, reflected in both the TCSEW and police statistics. The TCSEW suggested that domestic burglaries declined by 72% during the lockdown period. In contrast, commercial burglary rates have increased (Abrams, 2020). In Vancouver, Hodgkinson and Andresen (2020) also identified an initial rise in commercial burglaries, but rates fell after police and business owners took countermeasures. While evidence on commercial burglary is limited, due to the restraints mentioned above, Felson, Jiang and Xu (2020) found a shift from burglaries in residential areas to burglaries in mixed use areas of Detroit.

As suggested previously, if less people are on the streets, robberies and thefts from the person may decrease. This is especially so for offences that require stealth, but lack of other pedestrians and traffic might mean that bag-snatching and robbery from the person by force would increase. Additionally, if people rely on more home deliveries, robbery from delivery vehicles might increase. Despite this, many studies report a decline in robberies (Campedelli et al., 2020a; Campedelli et al., 2020b), although there appears as yet little refinement *vis a vis* different types of robbery or any differences between theft from the person and robbery.

With regards to other thefts, closure of many shops has resulted in a reduction in thefts from shops, a pattern found in various countries, including Australia (Payne et al., 2020), the UK (Halford et al., 2020), and the US (Campedelli et al., 2020a). Less use of cars may mean a reduction in car-related crime, given that cars parked in urban centres are more vulnerable than those in garages, drives and residential streets (Clarke & Mayhew, 1994),

but thefts of bicycles may rise, and where social distancing means goods are delivered and left on doorsteps, thefts from doorsteps may increase. There is less evidence on these offences, although Payne et al. (2020) and Halford et al. (2020) found a decrease in thefts from cars. Perhaps surprisingly, the TCSEW also found a general decrease in thefts from members of the public., with a 73% fall in in the classification 'other theft of personal property' (Office for National Statistics, 2020a).

In contrast, internet-based crime might be expected to increase during lockdown. With people confined at home, dependence on the internet increased. Correspondingly, frauds through phone and internet would be expected to increase. These may be directly related to the pandemic (e.g. scams over selling face masks or COVD-19 testing kits), indirectly related to the pandemic (e.g. where customers are more dependent on purchasing goods online and are conned, where criminals offer government grants and loans, or indeed defraud the government through mis-claiming grants), or unrelated, as in the case of the plethora of money laundering scams that invite the reader to aid in the transfer of funds established by various former African leaders. Additionally, with schools closed and many working from home, children have been more likely to use the internet unsupervised, putting them more at danger of grooming. While there has been far less research on online offending, TCSEW data suggested an upward trend (Office for National Statistics, 2020a), and other UK and European sources also report an increase in online child abuse (BBC News, 2020a; EUROPOL, 2020; Romanou & Belton, 2020). Additionally, impressionistic evidence from across the world also suggests a rise in internet fraud and fraud linked to false claims by shadow businesses applying for government grants (Barth, 2020; Campbell, 2020; Lynch, 2020; Tett, 2020). One piece of research in the UK, by Buil-Gil et al. (2020) seems to confirm this. While only covering a 12-month period from May 2019-May 2020 and based on data from the website of *Action Fraud,* the UK National Fraud and Cybercrime Reporting Centre, they found a significant increase in various manifestations of cybercrime, including fraud associated with online shopping. Finally, and directly linked to increases in isolating, there appears to have been an increase in online dating scams (Sky News, 2020). [5]

Violence in public areas was expected to fall under lockdown, unless there were conflicts over shortages or social distancing around food shops, beaches etc. Correspondingly, analysis of data for violent offences, especially in public places, suggested a decrease (Ashby, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2020b; Payne et al., 2020), However, with more people confined at home, domestic violence might have been expected to increase, involving not just women but also children (NSPCC, 2020) and elderly parents. Strain theory supports this assumption (Agnew, 1992). Looking further at the relationship between those involved, we might expect domestic violence against those in the same household to

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[5] See for example: https://www.theverge.com/21366576/dating-app-scams-romance-women-quarantine-coronavirus-scheme.

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increase, but domestic violence against those from other households (for example assaults by estranged or former partners) to decrease. The evidence for domestic violence is currently not detailed enough to take account of these distinctions. In Dallas, Piquero et al. (2020) noted a short-term rise in police reports but no long-term trend. Other, less systematic, evidence suggests that while there is no clear pattern for violence in private residences, at least according to police figures, calls to Women's Refuges and Helplines has risen dramatically, indicating that women attacked in their homes may feel trapped and unwilling to involve the police but more likely to seek alternative solutions (BBC News, 2020b; Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Graham-Harrison et al., 2020; Taub 2020; Townsend, 2020a; Usher et al., 2020; WHO, 2020) (see also: Romanou & Belton, 2020).

This suggests a distinction between violence in private and public space. However, when restrictions were first put in place, and as they were partially lifted, there are indications that many types of violence and antisocial behaviour may have increased. The TCSEW, for example, noted that around one-fifth of adults thought that anti-social behaviour levels in their local area had decreased during the pandemic period, but just over half reported that they had noticed others breaching virus restrictions in their local area since the virus outbreak. Moreover, since restrictions were eased violence and antisocial behaviour had increased (Miner, 2020) as in Spain (McNeill, 2020). Of course, there may have been a further increase in offending where people have been charged with breaking the laws restricting and controlling behaviour during the lockdown. Again, there are variations between countries, both in the nature of the restrictions – travelling long distances, wearing facemasks, social distancing etc – and also on whether these restrictions are advisory or mandatory. However, as we roller-coast in and out of lockdown the potential for interpersonal conflicts has increased. In England, partial easing of the lockdown was met by hordes of day and overnight visitors to rural areas like the Lake District and coastal areas like Devon and Cornwall, provoking a hostile reaction from local people who felt that population movement was increasing the risk of transmission from high to low rate regions (Gold, 2020; Smallcombe, 2020). This subsequently led to targeted vandalism of cars and second homes and in some cases violence. Antisocial behaviour and public disorder have also increased in tourist areas and areas catering for the NTE. We have also seen altercations over social distancing, wearing facemasks etc, involving attacks on the transgressors or attacks by the transgressors on those attempting to enforce new regulations (Ng, 2020; Simcox, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Willsher, 2020). There is certainly the potential for interregional or intergenerational conflict or escalating hate crime.

That said, the indications are that in general crime rates fell during lockdowns. However, this did not apply to all offence types nor indeed to all areas. Studies in the UK (Farrell, 2020), Australia (Payne et al., 2020) and the US (Abrams, 2020; Campedelli et al., 2020b) demonstrate marked variations by area. There is some suggestion that lower crime, higher status areas might have seen a more marked decrease (Campedelli et al., 2020b), pos-

sibly indicating that offenders, who traditionally travel short distances to commit their crimes (Wiles & Costello, 2000) have become even more reluctant to travel. In Lancashire (England), however, Farrell (2020) notes an increase in anti-social behaviour offences in rural areas, which may indicate both an increase in fly tipping when legal refuse sites were closed, and problems caused by visitors/day trippers.

Policing and COVID-19

What then are the implications of the pandemic for the police and policing strategies?

The simplistic answer would be that if crime rates are falling, pressures on the police would be reduced. However, this ignores the fact that the police are having to adapt to new situations, at a time when as front-line workers the threat to their health is unknown but potentially serious.

Surprisingly, there has been less academic attention paid to policing (for exceptions see: Grace, 2020; McVie, 2020; O'Neill, 2020; Sheptycki, 2020), albeit this was addressed in the recent ESC Conference (McVie, 2020; Nogala, 2020; Roché, 2020). This is, moreover, more a case of speculative debate that actual research. Thus, a review of one crowdsourcing platform, *Prolific*, indicates a plethora of studies addressing the way the pandemic has affected behaviour and attitudes towards safety, but scarcely a mention of how the public perceive the role of the police during lockdown. One notable exception is the TCSEW that includes questions on public perceptions of policing under lockdown. This revealed that in England and Wales during August 2020, 91% of adults were satisfied with the way local police were responding to the coronavirus outbreak and that there was general support for police powers that were available to help enforce new laws, such as police issuing on-the-spot fines to people they found out of their homes without a good reason (72%) and police-enforced curfews (67%) (Office for National Statistics, 2020b). Alongside this, the government's Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) covering the same period found that 69% of adults thought that the police should be very strict or strict in enforcing the new rules, albeit only 15% thought the police *were* enforcing the rules strictly (Office for National Statistics 2020c).

This data, of course, is limited to England and Wales. However, despite increases in policy transference in an increasingly global world (Jones & Newburn, 2006a) there are marked variations between nations in both legal and police systems (Mawby, 2018). Moreover, just as the extent of COVID-19 and the health- and economic-based responses have varied between countries, so legislative and policing responses have differed (Godwin, 2020; Roché, 2020).

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Various commentators have pointed to key differences in the functions, structure and legitimacy of the police in different countries (see Mawby, 2018) to draw comparisons between police systems that are more control-oriented and those that are more service-oriented. In the former, clearly, non-democratic police systems have been decisively used to enforce the policing of health initiatives, whether through advanced technology, in the case of South Korea (Dudden & Marks, 2020) and Russia (Magnay, 2020; Rapoza, 2020; Reevell, 2020; Roth, 2020) or through more traditional militaristic or ideologically dominated police institutions: here, examples from Russia, Saudi Arabia (The National, 2020),Iran (The New Arab, 2020),Iraq (Watkins, 2020), the PRC (Aljazeera, 2020; Li, 2020), illustrate the refocusing of already powerful police systems on enforcing new 'lockdown laws'. Similar examples can be found in the EU, where relatively new democracies may use the pandemic to hasten a return to more traditional control-dominated policing, Hungary being a case in point (Williamson, 2020).

Within Europe, despite recent convergence there are considerable variations in police systems (Mawby, 2018) and public attitudes towards and trust in the police (Schaap, 2018), and variations in the extent to which community policing has become embedded in police philosophies. However, in some ways policing the lockdown has underscored historic concerns about the reality of democratic policing. The philosophy of community policing thus almost inevitably glosses over the fact that societies are comprised of a multitude of communities, with different lifestyles and priorities as well as different histories of police-public interaction. Policing during the pandemic inevitably raises issues concerning whether communities are being policed equally (Grace, 2020). Given the primacy of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the unequal impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities (Public Health England, 2020), ethnicity has been a focal point of critiques of the discriminatory application of new police powers (Amnesty International, 2020; Boffey, 2020). But differences according to, *inter alia,* age, class and region are also important. The example of German police enforcing a blockade to prevent residents, many COVID-positive, leaving a tower block (BBC News, 2020d), is typical of many police actions across the world where social, structural and economic inequalities interact with health risks and law enforcement in a viscous circle.

However, before we follow those like Sheptycki (2020) in viewing the pandemic as a toe-hold towards more authoritarian and totalitarian police systems, it is important to recognise that alongside the concerns of more radical organisations like Amnesty International (2020) and Human Rights Watch (2020) much of the hostile reaction to lockdowns has been orchestrated by the hard right, with liberal support for increased police powers and more proactive policing, as long as it is proportionate, fair, and time-limited. Moreover, while the extent to which the police throughout the UK have used their new powers varies markedly (McVie, 2020), there is no evidence that the police have embraced them

with any enthusiasm. It is perhaps, then, appropriate to consider ways in which police practices have changed, and how this is likely to apply in the long-term.

Overall, it is clear that police and policing has been impacted in at least three ways:

- *Enforcement of new legislation*. In almost all societies affected, new laws have been introduced to control, among other things, use of public and semi-public space, mobility, and wearing of facemasks (Godwin, 2020). While these are not always unambiguous – the England example being a case in point (Casciani, 2020; Davies, 2020; House of Commons Library, 2020; Kestler & Fowles, 2020; Martin, 2020; O'Carroll, 2020; O'Neill, 2020; Townsend, 2020b) - this does create a new pool of offenders and also potential new trigger points for conflict between the police and public (Burke, 2020; Cave & Dahir, 2020). It also creates schisms between different factions of the public who think that the police are exerting too much or too little control. In the short-term, clearly the police need to use their new powers to 'police health' in ways that are fair and proportionate, according to the core principles of community policing (O'Neill, 2020). In the long-term, it is crucial that such powers are maintained for no longer than is absolutely necessary.

- *Use of new strategies*. Two strategies used to police illegal movements have been the use of drones and smartphone technology to plot transmission of the virus. In the former case, the police use of drones, in Paris (Schippers, 2020) and Yorkshire (Pidd & Dodd, 2020) proved controversial and was stopped, unlike in Russia (Rapoza, 2020). In the case of smartphone technology (a notable failure in the UK) in contrast, the technology has been introduced to track the disease but what was less controversial in more authoritarian regimes such as South Korea (Dudden & Marks, 2020) has raised concerns among the public regarding its retention and future use by policing agencies against known offenders and terrorist suspects (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The use of advanced technologies in Russia, for example (Reevell, 2020; Roth, 2020) is a salutary reminder of such dangers.

- *Deployment of new personnel*. In public space, many local governments have introduced new units to control public behaviour. These essentially are a reinvention of plural policing developments that expanded at the beginning of the century (Jones & Newburn, 2006b; Mawby, 2008; O'Neill & Fyffe, 2017) but were curtailed with cuts to policing budgets. For example, in parts of England street marshals have been employed to advise and encourage social distancing (BBC News, 2020c). In France, rather bizarrely, hunters and gamekeepers were briefly recruited to enforce restrictions to movement (Bock, 2020). These agents may have limited powers, but they can call on the public police for assistance. In contrast, in introducing the requirement for shoppers to wear facemasks, the English government has made it clear that the responsibility for policing in shops lies

with the shops' management. This widens the duties of store security guards, but also adds a new onus of responsibility for small shopkeepers. Additionally, there are calls on the public to exert their influence by reporting neighbour-transgressors, adding a new layer to the guardianship concept discussed earlier (Hollis-Peel & Welsh, 2014; Reynald, 2011). Overall, though, we have a policing responsibility conferred on many who did not ask for or want it. While the UK government has emitted mixed messages regarding moral obligations to report lockdown transgressors (Hinde, 2020), unsurprisingly there is a reluctance among shopkeepers to 'snitch' on customers and residents to 'snitch' on neighbours, and where they do, as noted above, this may accentuate conflict.

Clearly the police in different nations have had to adjust to a different crime and disorder context, with many crimes decreasing but others more common. At the same time, additional responsibilities mean that they have been engaged in different contexts, involving both peace keeping and control, often with minimal guidance and an ambiguous legal foundation. The situation is perhaps even more contentious for others drawn into the policing process, invariably with even less legal guidance and often without any willingness to inhabit the 'front-line'. For the public police, though, policing the pandemic has inevitably led to conflict with different publics with different perspectives on the threat posed by COVID-19, the moral and legal bases for lockdown, and views on rights of movement. At present there appears to be rather less research addressing police/public relations than there is on the impact of the pandemic on crime, but it is arguable that policing the pandemic will have at least as great a long-term impact.

In Conclusion

So, in conclusion, I'd argue that the pattern of crime has changed during the coronavirus pandemic and that in general there has been an overall decrease in crime. But these changes will vary both between offense types and between countries depending on different governments' responses to the pandemic. The way the public respond to lockdown and the subsequent easing and then reinforcement of restrictions combines with the way the lockdown is policed, is also important to consider, and will inevitably vary between countries and regions within countries.

This raises two final questions. Firstly, how far have policing strategies been adjusted to respond to changing patterns of crime and disorder? Clearly this varies between countries, as does the likelihood that new powers for policing health will be maintained and justified through new 'threats' post-COVID. Secondly, how will crime readjust after the pandemic: will displaced crimes be replaced or will new crime patterns persist? Essentially, future research needs to address the twin questions of whether crime and policing will attain 'new normals' as the pandemic subsides.

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