

# The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Law Enforcement Practice

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent crisis continues to have a significant and potentially long-lasting impact on our everyday lives, on the serious and organised crime landscape in Europe and on law enforcement practice. The consequences of the crisis on law enforcement work have been strongly felt and have been manifold. Police authorities had to adapt by stepping up coordination efforts; they had to refocus their work on priority areas such as maintaining public order, overseeing border control and compliance with lockdown measures. Certain crime areas that have been particularly pronounced in the crisis context have been also set as key priorities for some national law enforcement authorities. New, specific working measures had to be designed to ensure the safety and protection of law enforcement staff carrying out their duties on the ground. In parallel, law enforcement authorities had to devise contingency plans to address the reduction in the work force stemming from COVID-19 infections. The COVID-19 crisis has also prompted the reassessment of law enforcement cross-border cooperation practices and the need to identify suitable solutions for operational secure remote communication.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, law enforcement, crisis response, cross-border cooperation

More than a year since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent crisis continues to have a significant and potentially long-lasting impact on our everyday lives, on the serious and organised crime landscape in Europe and on law enforcement practice. Criminals are resourceful and continue to operate during times of crises, taking advantage of new vulnerabilities and changes in the wider environment. Both, opportunistic ventures and organised crime have exploited and profited from the pandemic context, shifting market focus and *modus operandi*. Serious and organised crime has continued and in fact, flourished during the crisis. Law enforcement had to ensure that its response to crime remains effective during the pan-

demic. Law enforcement authorities in the EU Member States and Partner Countries similarly had to adjust to a new working reality as the consequences of the crisis on law enforcement work have been strongly felt. The topic has also garnered the attention of the academic community with a few research being published on the organisational and operational consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on law enforcement agencies in the United States (Jennings & Perez, 2020; Lum, Maupin & Stoltz, 2020; Waseem & Laufs, 2020) and how police officers mentally tolerated the strain in some EU Member States in view of the new measures and duties introduced as a consequence of the crisis (Frenkel et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the academic literature pertaining

to the topic remains limited. This paper aims to add to the discussion by providing an overview of the key coping strategies taken by some EU Member States, Europol's cooperation partners and Europol itself in order to mitigate the consequences the crisis exerted on law enforcement work. The data used for this paper comprises contributions provided by EU MS and Third Partners to Europol as well as internal briefing notes produced at Europol.

In the EU, law enforcement authorities had to adapt to this volatile situation by stepping up coordination efforts and refocusing their work on priority areas such as maintaining public order, overseeing border control and compliance with lockdown measures. While some EU Member States have opted for the creation of dedicated task forces or central command posts in order to devise an approach to COVID-19, there have been also countries where law enforcement coordination has been under the remit of ministries of internal affairs (Europol, 2020, p. 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted law enforcement authorities with a set of environmental demands and stressors, most specifically with relation to the risk of infection and new tasks (Frenkel et al., 2020). In practical terms, this has entailed additional organisational and operational challenges which have necessitated the introduction of adequate responses or as Frenkel et al. term it (2020), coping resources. New working procedures had to be devised adhering to social distancing and remote working, while ensuring that the new measures did not affect business continuity (Europol, 2020e, p. 3). Law enforcement authorities had to devise contingency plans as well in case of reduction in the work force stemming from COVID-19 infections (Europol, 2020b, p. 4). New, specific working measures had to be designed and implemented in order to ensure the safety and protection of law enforcement staff carrying out their duties on the ground. Interpol and national law enforcement authorities developed dedicated awareness-raising campaigns and guidelines to inform law enforcement staff on how to stay safe, how to interact with citizens during the crisis and how to protect themselves against the COVID-19 virus (Interpol, 2020; Europol 2020b, p. 4).

As other law enforcement authorities, Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, had to adapt to the crisis circumstances. In order to ensure its business continuity, since end February

2020 Europol activated its Crisis Management Team (CMT), a decision making body where COVID-19 related decisions concerning Europol's staff, its premises and Europol's operational and strategic activities have been assessed and taken. The CMT is still active and follows carefully the pandemic's evolution in order to adapt the Agency's response to the volatile circumstances.

Certain crime areas that have been particularly pronounced in the crisis context – such as crime against persons, cybercrime, including online child sexual abuse, online fraud, counterfeiting and organised property crime – have been also set as national key priorities for some EU Member States' law enforcement authorities (Europol 2020b, p. 3.). In parallel, some law enforcement authorities also suspended non-essential missions, limited arrests in preliminary investigations and scaled down certain policing duties in the beginning of the crisis in order to be able to focus on the most urgent cases and new priorities. These new priorities included the enforcement of lockdown rules and enhanced border controls as well as the oversight of the safety of hospitals, test centres, vaccination centres and the transportation of patients (Europol, 2020, p. 6).

The COVID-19 crisis had significantly impacted cross-border law enforcement cooperation and prompted the reassessment of collaborative practices. An urgent need emerged to identify suitable solutions for operational secure remote communication and information exchange in crisis situations. Several discussions were held at the EU decision-making level in view of enhancing cross border law enforcement cooperation and secure communication and information exchange during the COVID-19 crisis (Council of the European Union, 2020a; Council of the European Union 2020b; Council of the European Union 2020c). Based on the recommendations of the European Council and in response to the increased need to exchange information between Member States and Third Countries on policing issues related to the COVID-19 crisis which do not fall under Europol's mandate, Europol launched the so-called v-ROOM (Virtual Requests for out of Mandate) European Platform for Experts (EPE). This platform is accessible to liaison officers, Europol National Units and National Contact Points (MS and Third Parties) as well as Europol staff and intended for the exchange of COVID-19 related strategic information and requests, such as performance evaluation, logistical or legal issues (Europol 2020c, p. 4).

The COVID-19 crisis has also amplified the prevention efforts of law enforcement agencies. Informing the public about ongoing crime schemes and raising awareness on how it can be avoided to fall victim of them have been crucial during the pandemic when criminals exploited the vulnerabilities created by the crisis. Some law enforcement authorities engaged in informing citizens on COVID-specific crime threats (Europol, 2020e, p. 3). In its efforts to inform the general public on the evolution of crime in the pandemic context, Europol issued several strategic reports on the topic, set up a specific COVID information campaigns site about the major crime threats and published a how-to-guide on COVID-19 global online safety for parents and carers, given the increased time spent online by children.

One can argue that the pandemic can no longer be viewed as an emergency: some of the wider changes that were introduced as exceptions in societies' way of working, have become recurrent and normal and are

likely to stay for some time. The same applies to the realm of law enforcement; the COVID-19 crisis will likely leave a heritage of long lasting effects on the EU criminal landscape and law enforcement work.

However, learning from crisis experience may also make the work of law enforcement more resilient and better equipped in the long-term. Europol and national law enforcement authorities need to be ready to face similar challenges and learn from past experiences. Effectively learning from crises relies on the exchange of best practices and effective preparedness. It is important to reflect and assess how law enforcement authorities should approach not only evolving crime threats, but also what lessons are there to be drawn from crisis experience when it comes to policing work. Therefore, it is essential to map the mitigating measures that can be applied to the work of law enforcement organisations in crisis situations and further the academic debate on their viability and effectiveness.

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