

# Crime in the time of coronavirus: **Trends, typologies, and the longer term implications for the Probation Service?**

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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. But what effect might these changing patterns of crime have on probation services? More specifically, what types of crimes and 'criminals' might practitioners see walk through their doors in the months and years to come?

As [Fergus McNeill \(2020\)](#) and [Jake Phillips \(2020\)](#) have both pointed out in recent blog posts, supervising those on probation during this time of national lockdown has required frontline probation staff to adopt new ways of working. For the most part, this has meant relying on technology to deliver what is fundamentally a face-to-face service. Both McNeill and Phillips raise important points around how individual practitioners are coping with these multiple challenges, and in doing so, highlight the increased stresses that such requirements place upon them. However, though these pieces draw important attention to the impact of the lockdown on the current ways in which probation services are being delivered, we would also do well to consider what this lockdown might mean to future probation practice. To do this, we must therefore pay attention to what crime is currently looking like in the UK.

## Recent patterns in crime

Since the lockdown began, crime rates have been reported as having fallen considerably. The National Police Chiefs Council ([NPCC](#)) stated that crime in England and Wales is down 28% from the four weeks to April 12th, compared with same period in the previous years. Similarly, Scotland reported a 25% fall in overall crime ([BBC News, 2020](#)). These trends have been noted particularly in certain types of crimes. For example, serious assaults and personal robbery are both down 27%, and rape is down 37%. However, despite such trends, other types of crime have been

seen to be on the rise. Though it is important to recognise that looking at crime rates in such a reductive way can be misleading, and that acknowledging the role that *other* factors play in such an effect is essential (not least that restrictions on movement and the closure of most commercial business will mean substantially fewer opportunities for people to commit crime), what this lockdown has revealed is that there are, however temporary, changes in *patterns* of offending.

One of the most prevalent has been in cases of online fraud and, in particular, internet scams. The City of London Police reported a 400% increase in such activities in March ([Bevan, 2020](#)), with Action Fraud noting 23 reports of fake HMRC emails over a three day period in April, along with 131 reports of individuals being sent a bogus "GOV.UK" email ([Goodman, 2020](#)). 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 (PPE) and the advertisement of false coronavirus 'treatment kits' ([Choi, 2020](#); [Europol, 2020](#)). The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) reported that it took down more than 2,000 such scams just last month ([BBC News, 2020](#)). In addition, there have been a multitude of fraudsters posing as banks, government officials, and health service providers, all operating 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](#)).

There has also been indication of an upward trend in online child sexual abuse. Thames Valley Police received 64 such reports in March, compared with 26 for the same month in 2019 ([BBC News, 2020](#)), with the National Crime Agency suggesting that 300,000 sex abusers posed a threat online ([Brunt, 2020](#)).

Moreover, though online child sex abuse figures have not shown to have increased, according to the Metropolitan Police (Met) data, they have warned such abuse is still likely to rise following the surge of internet usage over the past few months. The Met have noted that many children will only show up in statistics after time has been taken for the analysis of such images, and when enough intelligence has been gathered to justify an arrest ([Culbertson, 2020](#)).

The most documented crime trend, however, has been in incidents of domestic abuse. The Met have reported 4,093 arrests in London for domestic abuse in just six weeks, with charges for such offences up 24% from the previous year, dating back to when people were first advised to self-isolate ([Snuggs, 2020](#)). According to online research company SEMrush, the National Domestic Abuse Helpline saw a 120% increase in calls over one 24 hour period during the early stages of the lockdown, with traffic on their website increasing by 156% between February and March. In addition, the charity Refuge reported a 700% increase in calls to its helpline in a single day. Of most concern, Karen Ingala Smith's site, Counting Dead Women, noted 14 domestic abuse killings of women in the period between late March and early April 2020 ([Ingala Smith, 2020](#)), with an additional 10 cases identified since that period.

### A new category of 'offender'

It is important to reflect here that the crimes described thus far are ones that are both known and established. Yet there are others that are distinctly less familiar. Though there has been a clear downturn in overall crime rates, incidents of 'anti-social behaviour' have increased exponentially. Indeed, in the four weeks to April 15th, there were 178,000 incidents across England and Wales, marking a 59% rise on last year ([Shaw, 2020](#)). So why might this be?

The advent of the pandemic, (and its associated countrywide lockdowns), has brought about the rise of a new category of crime. As police powers have increased under the authority of the new [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Action Plan](#), many 'normal' behaviours have become criminalised. In response to this, the UK has seen the use of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs), with 14,244 such fines issued in England and Wales between March 27th and May 11th for alleged breaches of coronavirus lockdown rules ([ITV News, 2020](#)). We have also seen the construction of a new type of violent crime, that of deliberate infections (through malicious coughing and spitting). As identified by the Crown Prosecution Service ([CPS](#)), threatening others with coronavirus contagion, typically alongside other substantive offences such as assault (of emergency workers), theft and burglary, has seen a surge of new prosecutions ([Casciani, 2020](#); [Tidman, 2020](#)). In a snapshot of cases, the CPS in the North West reported that six individuals had received prison sentences ranging from 4 months to 3 years on charges partially or wholly related to coronavirus-related threats ([CPS, 2020](#)). There has also been the assault of a railway worker who contracted and later died from the virus after being deliberately spat on at Victoria Station ([Guardian, 2020](#)). Though causal links were not established, the assault and the concerns it raised present another dimension to all this.

However, though causing deliberate harm to others may see unequivocal support for a criminal justice response, there has been criticism for 'over zealous policing' ([ITV News, 2020](#)). In the past month, there have been numerous reports of individuals targeted by police for acts such as moving a tree ([Slater, 2020](#)) or sitting in their front garden ([Stubley, 2020](#)), with others being 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, 2020](#)).

There have subsequently been requests for information around the contesting of such fines (Thompson, 2020) and with this of course, an implication of a refusal to pay. Indeed, though the fine itself does not comprise a conviction, as with all (police-issued) fines, refusal to pay could find that individual being summonsed to court. And refusal to provide a name and address in relation to that fine being issued may result in an arrest – as was almost the case for a Manchester man in early April (Busby, 2020), and was the case for a woman in Newcastle (Dearden, 2020).

Significantly, the CPS has conducted a **recent review** of the 231 police charges relating to breaches of coronavirus legislation, finding 56 to be incorrect. This includes 12 charges brought under the Health Protection Regulations 2020 (which relates to individuals having a reasonable excuse for being outside their home), and all 44 under the Coronavirus Act 2020 (which relates to “potentially infectious persons” refusing to co-operate with the police or public health officers when it comes to screening for Covid-19). Though this still leaves the majority of charges being upheld, this recent announcement is likely to cause some doubt amongst the British public when it comes to the criminal justice response to policing the coronavirus pandemic.

## Conclusion

The facts and figures reported in this piece have interesting implications for probation services. With such clear changes in patterns of crime, frontline staff may find themselves sitting in front of fewer service users convicted of offences relating to violence, robbery and theft, but more linked to domestic abuse, fraud, and various online crimes. Though this in itself is an important consideration for practitioners, such shifts in crime typologies may also have a knock-on effect on other aspects of the service. Indeed, it is possible we may start to see patterns of interventions referrals change in line with need.



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For example, the domestic abuse programme, Building Better Relationships, may see a surge in referrals, with programmes such as the Drink Impaired Drivers Programme, and even the violence management programme, Resolve, seeing a significant dip.

However, that is not the only difference probation services might see coming their way. What may also prove to be new territory is the potential influx of those convicted under the new coronavirus laws, in particular the Health Protection Regulations. Though most charges will likely fall under the restriction of social movement, and thus will have been dealt with through police-issued fines, a proportion will receive sentences delivered by the courts. As such, frontline probation staff may find themselves in the novel, and potentially quite challenging, position of having to supervise individuals who have been found guilty of crimes without clear precedents.

(This piece has been adapted from recent work undertaken by the Kent, Surrey & Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company's Research and Policy Unit - <https://www.ksscrc.co.uk/2020/05/12/research-coronavirus-and-crime>)