

HFG RESEARCH AND POLICY IN BRIEF

Violence and the Pandemic

Urgent Questions for Research

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The COVID-19 pandemic is the deepest global crisis yet in the 21st century. Its effects radiate into every aspect of life. In this *HFG Research and Policy in Brief*, we address the implications of the pandemic for a problem of signal importance: violence.

Service providers report dramatic increases in domestic violence and abuse as intimate partners and children spend weeks in isolation. Citizens of East Asian descent have been targeted in hate crimes, sometimes violent, in which they are blamed for “causing” the coronavirus. From various areas of the developing world come reports that anger over food shortages and governmental ineffectiveness have sparked looting and other forms of civil unrest. Yet, at the same time, police in numerous cities are seeing unparalleled drops in street violence as the bustle of 21st century urban life comes to a grinding halt.

So what exactly is happening as the pandemic unfolds to specific forms of violence, from civil wars, terrorism, and social unrest to gang homicides, child abuse, and bullying? What violence-fuelling mechanisms are triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic? How much variation is there globally in violent responses to the crisis? Will violence trends change direction as the crisis persists? What interventions can governments deliver to mitigate violence-promoting influences of the crisis, and how effective should we expect them to be? And what will happen to violence when the constraints on daily life are relaxed and economies return to—or at least toward—normal?

Violence researchers across the world are uniquely equipped to formulate and provide timely answers to these and other urgent questions. High-quality research, grounded in theory and rigorous in methodology, on how the COVID-19 emergency affects violence, what we can learn from drops in violence, and how to counter increased violence can inform policy, practice, and action, as the pandemic continues to unfurl and as the globe grapples with its long-lasting aftermath.

Here we address the most pressing of these questions in hopes of providing a point of departure for research that can illuminate the links between the pandemic and violence:

- The lockdown and violence
- Measuring violence levels before and after the pandemic
- The special urgency of domestic violence
- The political violence of armed conflicts and terrorism
- Hatred, scapegoats, and conspiracy theories
- What happens to rates of violence after the pandemic

Linking Violence to the Pandemic: The Lockdown

What are the causal links between the pandemic and violence? There are many, but the most relevant mechanisms result from the emergency measures taken to combat the pandemic by interrupting the transmission pathways of the virus. They include health-promotion recommendations, especially social distancing; enforced constraints on daily life, such as the closure of bars, restaurants, schools, businesses, and factories; prohibition of public gatherings; constriction of international and national

travel; and the electronic surveillance of daily movements, such as use of cell-phone software providing information on past movements of those who become infected.

These measures are commonly referred to as “the lockdown.” However, researchers interested in assessing the effects of the pandemic on violence need to disentangle the various interrelated measures triggered by the arrival of COVID-19: Exactly which emergency measures have been taken, and to what extent have they encroached on people’s lives? Where and when were they imposed? And how much have various groups complied?

For example, in most countries in Europe and the Americas, alcoholic beverages have remained freely available during the lockdown, even if sales hours were often restricted. (In several countries sales of alcohol have spiked since the imposition of the lockdown. Whether this reflects mere consumer stockpiling against feared shortages or a commensurate jump in consumption as well is not yet known.) In contrast, in some countries, including South Africa, the Philippines, Greenland, and India, the lockdown was accompanied by a comprehensive ban on the sale of alcohol out of concerns about the potential for increased domestic violence. Comparative analyses of otherwise similar lockdown regimes with and without bans on alcohol sale could yield important insights, benefiting from a natural-experiment situation, into the effects of alcohol bans on intimate-partner violence and child abuse.

The measures taken in response to the pandemic have affected a variety of causal mechanisms that are central to micro-, meso-, and macro theories of violence (see table below). These include the transformation of routine activity patterns and its consequences for patterns of face-to-face encounters; the disappearance of some violence-related opportunity patterns, such as unsupervised time of teenagers, and the emergence of others, such as poorly protected targets for property crime or homebound victims in intimate partnerships; increase in violence-potentiating emotions and psychological states—*anxiety, anger, and fear*—owing to the unwanted changes in familiar daily routines, unemployment, hunger, and the loss of loved ones; and changes in patterns of formal and informal social control, including increased surveillance of movements and interactions and possibly a heightened sense of solidarity and mutual obligation in at least some communities

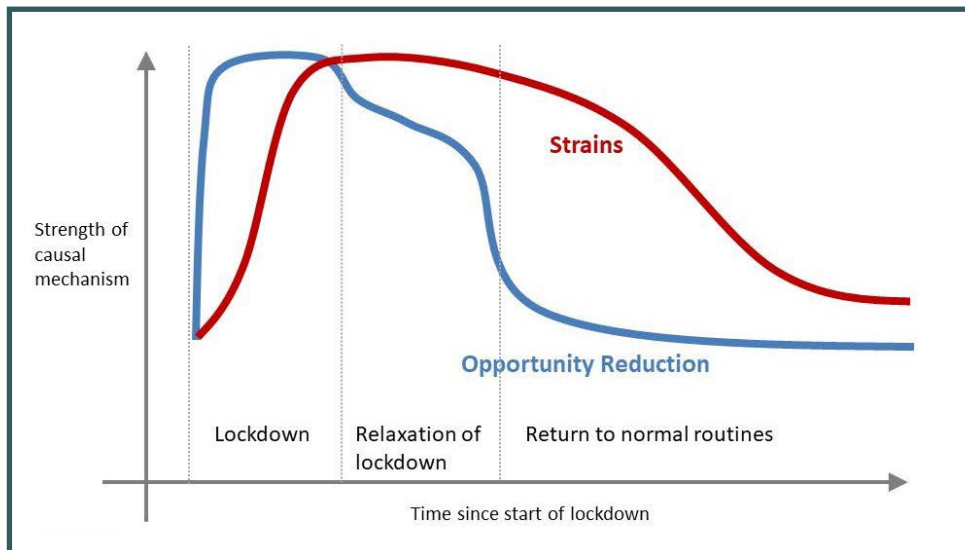
VIOLENCE-RELATED MECHANISMS AND POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Causal mechanisms	Examples of Hypotheses
<i>Routine activities</i>	Street violence declines as citizens stay home but violence in domestic contexts increases during the lockdown.
<i>Opportunities</i>	In contexts of regular political violence, a shift in attention by police and media to the lockdown provides opportunities for unpunished attacks on political opponents.
<i>Formal and informal social control</i>	The introduction of surveillance technologies aimed at controlling health also reduces public violence.

<i>Strains</i>	In the poorest areas of the world, unemployment, hunger, and despair increase the occurrence of street crime and/or anti-government violence.
<i>Motivating emotions</i>	Increased anxiety and anger lead to more child maltreatment during lockdown.
<i>Prices and availability of goods</i>	The ban on alcohol as part of the lockdown in some countries leads to a decline in all types of serious violence.
<i>Interaction costs</i>	Awareness of the risk of infection reduces incidence of physical violence between strangers.

Furthermore, these causal mechanisms may have different effects as the crisis progresses. For example, we may hypothesize that some violence-reducing mechanisms have a relatively immediate effect, while some violence-promoting mechanisms may build up more slowly as the negative effects of the lockdown accumulate. The figure below illustrates the idea. The opportunity-reduction effects of the lockdown on night-time street violence, school bullying, or street robbery probably occur fairly quickly, in parallel with the speed at which such activity fields shrink. Also, compliance with mandated restrictions may be highest in the earlier stages, when citizens largely support the emergency measures. On the other hand, strains resulting from lockdown—stress, depression, anger, hunger, or the loss of employment, social contact, and hope—are likely to build up more slowly and manifest mainly at a later stage. And as citizens’ belief in the necessity of the restrictions declines, the willingness to comply may decline as well.

TIMING AND STRENGTH OF CAUSAL MECHANISMS DURING PANDEMIC



Measuring Violence: More or Less?

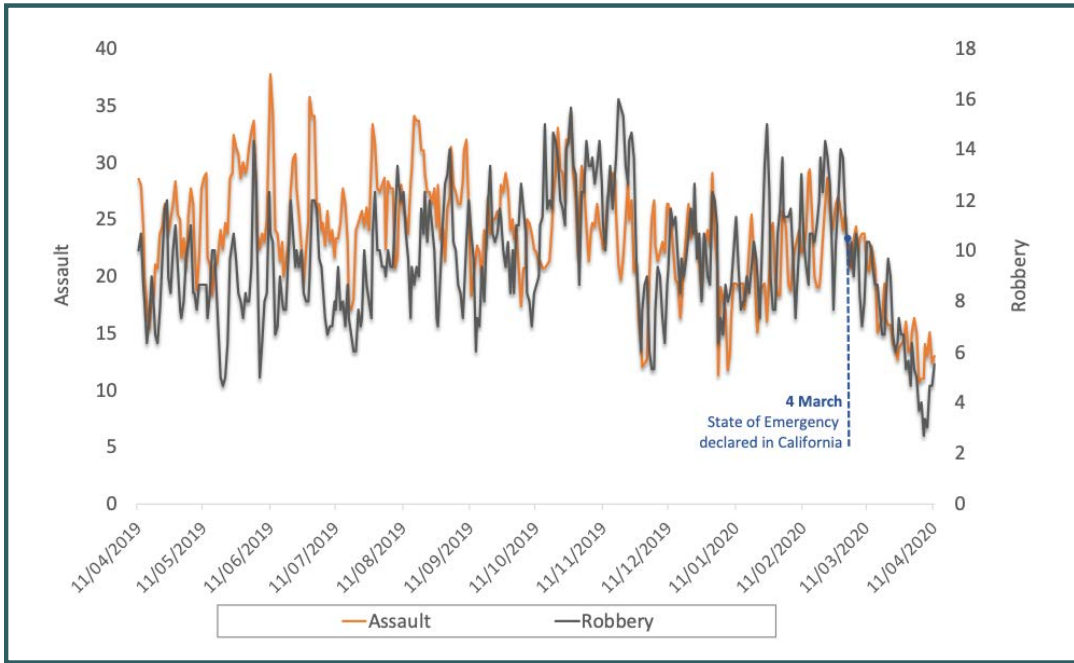
Has the COVID-crisis increased or decreased overall levels of violence? It will be some time until we have firm evidence for each society, based on comprehensive victim surveys, that will help us to better understand how the emergency regime has affected the incidence of interpersonal and sexual violence. For now, the evidence is limited to police data, hospital emergency admissions, and scattered statistics on the demand for helpline advice and admission to women's refuges. Each has its serious limitations. Globally, up-to-date homicide counts are one of the best measures for gauging the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on violence.

City-wide incident-based crime data, in conjunction with large amounts of high-resolution data on daily movements, provide a unique opportunity to learn more about how violence is interwoven with daily routines (although both sorts of data are available for only a small fraction of the world's population). For scholars interested in causal inference, the emergency measures provide a unique opportunity to test and improve complex causal models at fine degrees of spatial and temporal resolution (Nagin and Sampson, 2019). In particular, we can use such data from before, during, and after the lockdown as well as comparative analyses across different lockdown regimes to generate powerful agent-based models, simulations that integrate vast amounts of information to model complex causal chains for predicting trends in violence.

Initial evidence from across the world suggests that many types of both violent and non-violent crime plunged as streets, bars, and nightclubs emptied. In South Africa the lockdown started on 27 March, and, as mentioned, was combined with a ban on alcohol sales. During the first week of the lockdown the police recorded a decline of 71 percent in homicide, 85 percent in rape, and 83 percent in serious assault, in comparison to the same week a year earlier (Marupeng, 2020). Similarly, across Latin America police-recorded street violence against strangers, such as robbery and assault, have plunged as the lockdown emptied the streets and the police enforced emergency measures (Semple and Ahmed, 2020). Similar trends can be seen in U.S. cities, with assault and robbery in San Francisco having dropped around 50 percent below pre-emergency levels.

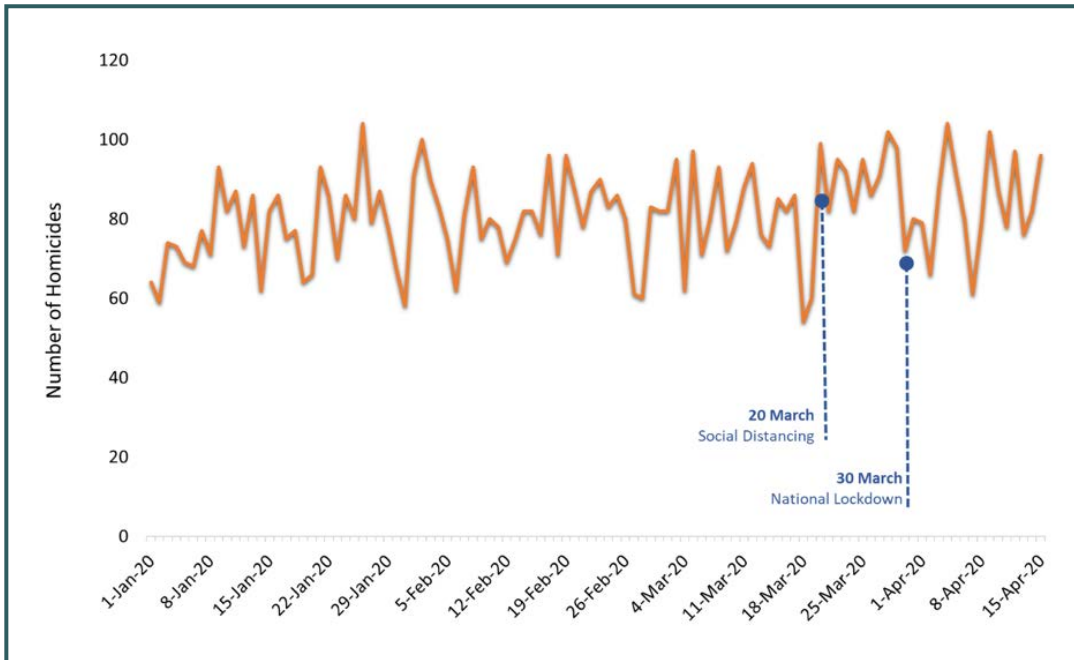
The decline has not been universal, however. In Mexico, where the national lockdown kicked in on 30 March, daily numbers of homicides have remained unchanged at around 80 cases per day (Gobierno de Mexico, 2020). The reasons are poorly understood. It is possible that tensions between drug cartels have stiffened as they face greater challenges to procuring chemicals, more difficulties with transporting drugs, and declining prices (Ferri, 2020). It is possible as well that poor local implementation and corruption leave ample space for organized crime to evade the lockdown and continue its violent activities, which account for a substantial fraction of serious violence in Mexico. It should be noted, however, that Mexico adopted lockdown measures relatively late in the pandemic—at the end of March—so the crime-reduction benefits occurring elsewhere in Latin America may yet arrive (Semple and Ahmed, 2020).

DAILY ASSAULTS AND ROBBERIES, SAN FRANCISCO, 11 APRIL 2019 TO 11 APRIL 2020



SOURCE: DATASF. MAP OF POLICE DEPARTMENT INCIDENT REPORTS: 2018 TO PRESENT, [HTTPS://DATA.SFGOV.ORG](https://data.sfgov.org) (MOVING 3-DAY AVERAGES)

DAILY HOMICIDES, MEXICO, 1 JANUARY 2020 TO 8 APRIL 2020



SOURCE: SECRETARÍA DE SEGURIDAD Y PROTECCIÓN CIUDADANA (SSPC), [HTTP://WWW.INFORMESEGUIDAD.CNS.GOB.MX](http://www.informeseuridad.cns.gob.mx)

In the United States, the number of firearms purchased in March during the COVID crisis is estimated to have doubled compared to March of 2019 (Small Arms Analytics, 2020). The motivation driving this increase is not self-evident, though it seems reasonable to conjecture that some combination of fear of lawlessness and the anticipation of possible purchase restriction in connection with the pandemic underlay it. Nor is the potential for violence in this spike in gun acquisition obvious. To estimate it, we would need to know, among other key facts, what percentage of the consumers creating this boom in purchases were arming themselves for the first time as opposed to merely augmenting their existing armory, as most U.S. gun owners possess more than one firearm (Cook and Goss, 2014).

The Urgency of Domestic Violence

It is imperative to better understand the effects of the COVID crisis on domestic violence. The lockdown means that around 80 percent of the world population—around 1.6 billion children and about 2 billion partnered adults aged 18-49—are spending many consecutive weeks mostly or entirely confined in their homes. This has led to grave concerns and a torrent of news stories that emergency measures are fuelling a surge in domestic violence, both against children and against women (e.g., Cluver, 2020). For intimate-partner violence the likely proximal mechanisms include economic anxiety, fear, depression, anger, quick escalation of tensions under unceasing cohabitation, and lack of help-seeking options for victims. These emotional factors would be expected to elevate the risk of violence against children in the home as well. Furthermore, lack of access to outdoor activities might be predicted to result in behavior by children liable to provoke violence in adults already prone to losing control from living with the spectre of a deadly disease and the deprivations imposed to protect against it.

Governments, civil-society actors, and international organizations such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization have promoted strategies aimed at mitigating the effects of the lockdown on couples and children, though there are still massive gaps in these provisions, and the risk of domestic violence will probably grow as the strains of the crisis accrue. These efforts include supporting parenting through expert advice, addressing mental health needs related to stress and depression, maintaining contact with and support for vulnerable groups, providing food and financial support, and offering innovative ways for victims to contact the police and service providers. In Italy and France, governments have arranged access to hotel rooms for women seeking safety from abuse, as admission to domestic-violence shelters would violate the social distancing requirements of the lockdown. In Argentina, women experiencing abuse are encouraged to request a red face mask in pharmacies as a coded request for a call to police or a help line. Pharmacists are instructed to record a woman's contact information, ostensibly so that she can be notified when her order arrives (Cannataro, 2020). Here, high quality research rooted in public health and prevention science can help to better assess the effectiveness of these measures.

The Political Violence of Armed Conflicts and Terrorism

Another strand of research should aim to elucidate the effects of the COVID crisis on armed conflicts and terrorism. As COVID-19 has saturated the global communication channels over the past weeks and months, the media have gone silent on the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, terrorism, suppression of minorities, and post-conflict peace processes. Not only do these conflicts continue but they are probably being affected in predictable ways by the crisis.

For example, political opportunity theory (Tarrow, 1994) would suggest that armed groups perceive the crisis as an opportunity to expand their control over territories or to eliminate adversaries. This may be happening in Colombia (Daniels, 2020), which has a long history of paramilitaries, drug lords, and FARC members assassinating opponents and community leaders. It appears that death squads are attacking peace activists more frequently now, taking advantage of a situation where all political attention is focussed on the virus, police resources are tied to controlling the lockdown, and the ability of activists to move in order to protect themselves is constrained.

It is reasonable to expect that the interruption of supply chains for manufactured goods as well as impairments in the systems through which food gets from where it is produced to the homes of consumers will lead to violent unrest in the form of looting (Smith, 2020) or attacks on government facilities or representatives. Such violence could result from mere rumors of impending shortages as well as real ones. Even in the absence of real or feared shortages, the massive numbers of unemployed workers in the wake of the pandemic's global economic collapse makes violence in the quest for food and goods a sound prediction.

Finally, we should not forget the potential for reverse causality. Violence and armed conflict may prepare the ground for the spread of pandemics. It has been argued, for example, that the severity of the 1918 influenza pandemic was partly due to the vulnerability of populations and the fragility of health systems worn down by World War I (Flecknoe, Wakefield, and Simmons, 2018). Similarly, recent research suggests that social contexts characterised by high violence and correlated social problems result in "syndemic vulnerability" (Singer, 2017), i.e., conditions where interacting deleterious factors increase the chances that a new health risk will spread easily and have devastating consequences.

Hatred, Scapegoats, and Conspiracy Theories

Historically, pandemics such as the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe in 1347-1351 were hotbeds for the spread of conspiracy theories and the scapegoating of minorities. When the Black Death arrived in Strasbourg, city authorities charged Jews with poisoning the wells and burned the entire community outside the city walls. Conspiracy theories with the potential to stoke hatred and violence on the fertile ground of people's fears also flourish in the current crisis. In Britain, the belief that the spread of the coronavirus is linked to 5G wireless technology has led to more than 30 arson and vandalism attacks against wireless towers and other telecom gear (Satariano and Alba, 2020).

In the United States reports of anti-Chinese assaults and hate crimes mount as politicians provide

legitimacy to blaming China for the spread of the virus (ADL, 2020). And in India, members of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have accused the Indian Muslim community of spitting on doctors and health workers with the aim of spreading the virus (Ellis-Petersen and Azizur-Rahman, 2020).

So far, manifestations of defamation and group hatred have remained relatively limited. However, the finding that one in four Americans believe that COVID-19 was intentionally produced in a lab suggests a large susceptibility to scapegoating and conspiracy theories (Schaefer, 2020). As the crisis continues, the risk of further economic chaos, food shortage, and despair will grow in tandem. Scapegoating theory and the theory of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2016) predict a rise in group-based hatred under such circumstances, which in turn can fuel collective violence, especially if stoked by populist leaders.

Out of Emergency - Back into Violence?

Historical research provides important insight into the effects of big historical shocks— wars, revolutions, and epidemics—on trends in homicide. One lesson they teach is that these effects tend to be transient. We can see dramatic ups or downs in homicide during a shock, but as normal life resumes homicide rates tend to be drawn back toward what they were before (Lappi-Seppälä and Lehti, 2014). Exactly why this is the case is not well understood.

Over the coming months 150 or so countries will eventually relax constraints on daily life, at different moments in time, and staggered in different ways within each country. This offers a unique opportunity to learn, in more detail than ever before, about the interplay of social forces that leads to the varying levels of violence characteristic of different societies. It should also be an opportunity to generate knowledge on what can be done to more effectively address violence as we return from the depths of the lockdown. At the same time, the eventual emergence of post-COVID societies will raise fundamental questions about the extent to which the extensive surveillance technologies and exceptional powers asserted by the state as part of emergency regimes will persist, and whether we will see the worldwide advance of digital or more traditional types of authoritarianism (Harari, 2020).

Conclusions

We all hope that this world health emergency will not repeat itself. However, every epidemic is an opportunity to learn. For violence researchers, the various emergency measures taken in response to COVID-19 pose an extraordinary opportunity to advance our understanding of the social, psychological, economic and situational mechanisms that influence rates of violence. Each is also a chance to gain better insight into the effectiveness of prevention strategies such as alcohol control, on-line parenting support, and mass surveillance.

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