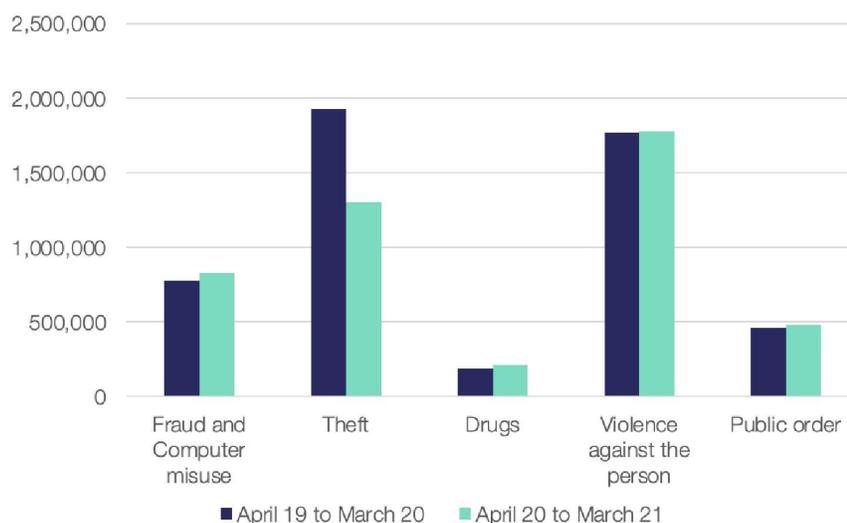


Finance). There was a particularly sharp rise in fraud reported by the public directly to Action Fraud which was 27 per cent higher than in the previous year (rising from 338,000 to over 428,000 offences).

Police recorded crime in April 2019 to March 2020 and April 2020 and March 2021²⁷



Fraud offenders exploited the conditions and markets that arose during the pandemic (for example, the supply of counterfeit Personal Protective Equipment), and many took advantage of the greater volume of prospective targets on the internet (Europol, 2020a). In an internal assessment, the NCA described increases in high harm categories of fraud including investment (increase of 29%), romance (increase of 42%) and courier fraud (increase of 38%) between March and July 2020. They also reported higher volumes of ransomware attacks targeting organisations.

The increase in home-working and the use of online technology to manage work and many other aspects of life enlarged the attack surface for cyber crime offenders (Europol, 2020b). And another crime-type affected by these conditions was online child sexual abuse (CSA). This includes offenders who view or share indecent images of children and those who groom and exploit children and young people online. The concern in the NCA was that the restriction of opportunities to perpetrate offline abuse would displace motivated offenders to offending in online spaces, and more time online across the whole population heightened the risk that more individuals would be drawn into offending (particularly, viewing indecent images of children). Furthermore, the simultaneous surge in the volume of children and young people in online spaces increased vulnerability to online grooming and exploitation, and the risk of children otherwise sharing self-generated sexual images online (Europol, 2020c).

²⁷ ONS, Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables 2021. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesappendixtables>. [Accessed December 7th 2021]

During the pandemic period the volume of recorded online CSA increased, which is a continuation of a trend seen over a number of years; the volume of Obscene Publications offences (predominantly comprised of indecent image of children offences) had risen 18 per cent when compared with the previous year (April 2019 to March 2020) and there was a small 3 per cent rise in the volume of sexual grooming offences (comprised largely of online grooming.)²⁸

However, much of online CSA offending is hidden, and the identification of these crimes is contingent on proactive measures in the technology sector (such as social media companies), frontline support services and law enforcement. The effect of the pandemic restrictions was to reduce opportunities to proactively identify these crimes. For example, the volume of recorded grooming or exploitation offences was likely inhibited by the reduced contact between children and professionals in education and support services during lockdown periods. The NCA also reported a reduced capacity in companies and bodies in the technology industry to generate and moderate intelligence on indecent images of children offences.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Covid dividend was extremely short-lived, if experienced at all

The data from our 12 forces suggests that the drop in recorded crime experienced in lockdown 1 provided limited opportunities for proactive policing as the public health demand took over. There were some gains made in the time taken to reach an outcome for a recorded crime, which dropped substantially during lockdown 1, but this then increased beyond pre-pandemic levels very soon after. The fact that a drastic reduction in recorded offences did not lead to a fall in demand attests to the well-established fact that most of the reactive demand on policing is not directly related to recorded crime. Whilst this is an often repeated statement, the data required to measure this demand, police *incident* data (rather than crime data), is so unreliable and inconsistently recorded that a 12 force comparison for this research was practically impossible. As the non-crime demand continues to grow, so will an appetite for measuring it and comparing the demand nationally.

Recommendation: The Home Office should require all forces to standardise police incident data collection and reporting.

The pandemic sped up and made clearer a broader shift in crime demand

The patterns of crime during the pandemic which have emerged in our analysis speak to a broader change in the composition of demand on policing. In most instances, the pandemic has only acted to accelerate or emphasise the existing trajectory. Through drastic changes to the opportunity structures available to (potential) offenders, the pandemic has made very visible the move away from traditional acquisitive crime, toward those which occur behind closed doors, involve vulnerable victims and are intrinsically more complex. Combined with the rise of

²⁸ Data retrieved from:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeinenglandandwalesappendixtables> - accessed 07.12.2021