Hannah Wharfe, Scarlett Furlong, Andy Feist and Alex Dunnett

We would like to thank Dr Samuel Langton (Postdoctoral Researcher at the Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement) and Dr Aki Roberts (Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) for peer reviewing this report.

We are very grateful to the following individuals who also contributed to the report: Jennifer Wilcox, Katherine Hopper and Thomas Wray.

Executive summary

This paper examines the relationship between changes in crime demand and charge volumes in England and Wales during the COVID-19 lockdowns. It seeks to add to a modest evidence base on the relationship between changes in police workload and the detection of crimes.

Imposing restrictions on individuals and businesses to curtail the spread of COVID-19 had a profound effect on people's behaviours, which in turn affected patterns of crime; police recorded crime (excluding fraud and computer misuse) fell markedly, down by 13% in the year ending March 2021, while crime weighted by severity also fell. This reduction was mainly attributed to limits on people's movement, the closing of retail establishments and the night-time economy, and an increase in people working from home. Theft offences saw particularly large falls.

The overall impact on charges was less marked. In the 12 months to 31 March 2021, there was a 5% reduction in charge volumes. However, in the first quarter (April to June 2020) – the period corresponding with the most restrictive lockdown measures – there was an increase in charge volumes, up 7% on the first quarter (April to June 2019) in the previous year.

These aggregate changes in charge volumes mask large crime type variations. On the one hand, there were large reductions in charges for many theft offences, with shoplifting seeing the largest percentage fall of all offences in the year ending March 2021 (down 40%). On the other hand, there were also a wide range of other offences – both victim and state-based – that recorded marked increases in charge volumes during the same period. Offences which recorded increases in charges of 10% or more included rape, arson, trafficking of drugs, vehicle interference and other sexual offences.

Forecasting analysis (ARIMA) was used to explore whether the changes in monthly charge volumes during COVID-19 lockdowns diverged from expected trends, for both the first 3 months of lockdown (April to June 2020) and for the year ending March 2021.

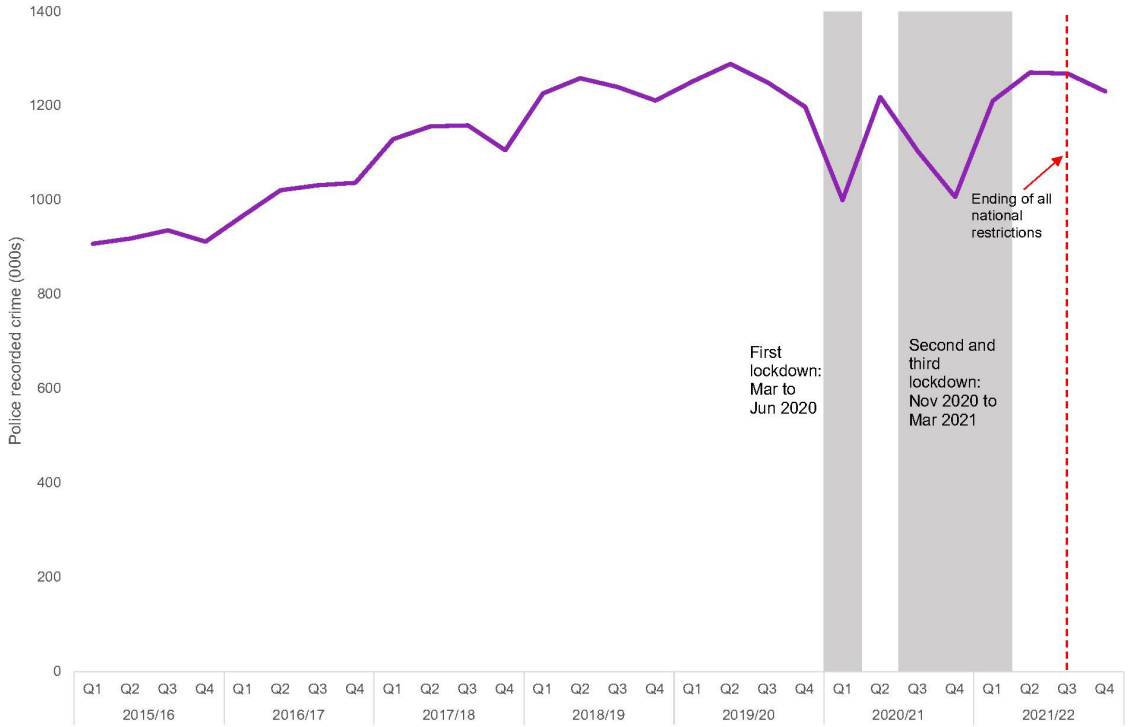
Months	Relevant dates and events
	29/03/2021 Six people could meet up in private and public venues.
April 2021	**12/04/2021** Non-essential shops, hospitality venues and entertainment venues could reopen (with guidance in place).
May 2021	**17/05/2021** More restrictions were lifted, allowing more people to meet up in public, outdoor and indoor venues.
July 2021	**19/07/2021** Step 4 was completed, lifting all lockdown restrictions, and officially ending the third national lockdown.

3. Trends in police recorded crime during COVID-19 lockdowns

Examining police recorded crime volumes before and during the COVID-19 period is a good starting point for showing how demand on the police changed during the various lockdowns. Crime demand is only one, albeit substantial, part of all the workload that the police deal with (see, for example, Laufs et al. (2021) for an overview of different types of police demand). However, it has particular importance in our understanding of the relationship with crime outcomes. Crime demands on the police have generally been the focal point of studies which have sought to explore the relationship between police workload and crime outcomes (for example, Roberts & Roberts, 2016).

Recorded crime has risen steadily since the year ending March 2016 due to many factors including: improvements in recording processes, the addition of new offences to police recorded crime, increased reporting for some offences (for example, for sex offences) and a ‘genuine’ increase in some types of crime (for example, serious violence) (see figure 1) (HMICFRS, 2021b, ONS; 2021a). However, between years ending March 2020 and 2021, there was a 13% decrease in police recorded crime.

Figure 1: Quarterly police recorded crime volumes (excluding fraud and computer misuse), year ending March 2016 to year ending March 2022



Total police recorded crime – excluding fraud and computer misuse – fluctuated across the period corresponding to COVID-19 restrictions (see figure 2)[footnote 5]. There were substantial falls in April 2020 compared with April 2019 (down 27%), broadly coinciding with the start of the first national lockdown. Police recorded crime started to increase as lockdown restrictions eased, and remained stable over the summer months of 2020, when there were fewer restrictions in place. There were further declines towards the end of 2021 during the second and third lockdowns. Police recorded crime appears to have returned to, and remained close to, pre-pandemic levels since national restrictions ended in July 2021.

Figure 2: Monthly police recorded crime volumes (excluding fraud and computer misuse), year ending March 2020 to year ending March 2022