



14TH UNITED NATIONS CONGRESS ON CRIME PREVENTION AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

KYOTO, JAPAN 7 – 12 MARCH 2021



For information only – not an official document

Crime prevention and criminal justice in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

Since March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the world. It has not only claimed more than a million lives, but it has also pushed millions of people into extreme poverty, and it has triggered a decline in human development for the first time since 1990.

Strained social and economic conditions have had an impact on crime and on efforts to prevent, investigate and adjudicate it. Lockdowns enabled new illicit markets to thrive, while others were disrupted, presenting unique challenges in crime prevention and criminal justice.

As part of its COVID-19 response, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has conducted research into the pandemic's impact on a range of crimes including migrant smuggling, trafficking of medical products and organized crime as well as violence against women. It has looked at how access to justice, prisons, corruption, money-laundering and wildlife crime have been affected. The scarcity of data has made it challenging to analyze and evaluate the COVID-19 impact on crime trends.

Crime trends during the pandemic

Across Europe there were clear declines in homicides during lockdown periods while in Latin America there were diverse trends, making it difficult to draw general conclusions.

Data from before the pandemic on human trafficking showed most victims were reportedly in a condition of economic need before recruitment. During the pandemic, an overall rise in unemployment rates in origin countries may increase the number of people willing to take risks for better economic opportunities, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking.

Despite lockdown measures, data shows migrants are still being smuggled on the three Mediterranean routes despite mobility restrictions and economic constraints.

The pandemic has brought demand for new products and services and a series of restrictions on

movement and access to markets. Organized crime has profited by providing these goods and services outside the law. There has been a steady rise in seizures of substandard personal protective equipment and falsified products and of scams and frauds related to procurement.

Criminal groups have stepped in to deliver aid packages and other necessities to the most needy, due to weaknesses in structures for providing emergency aid. Organized crime infiltration of the licit economy is a serious risk once societies start to reopen and could slow the COVID-19 recovery.

Border closures, travel restrictions and reduced flights have made trafficking in wildlife harder. Traffickers depend on a network of corrupt airport and customs contacts in specific locations, which cannot be quickly replicated elsewhere without significant risk and time.

Impact on sustainable development and crime

The pandemic's social and economic effects have been felt globally. A lack of economic growth combined with high economic and social inequality tends to increase levels of crime and violence. There is an urgent need to identify and address emerging risk factors for violent behaviour.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to these disruptions and risk being left behind in education, economic opportunities and health and wellbeing during a crucial stage of their life development. UNODC undertook activities throughout 2020 to ensure continuity of services for youth, parents and families and offer opportunities for positive youth development during and after the pandemic. Similarly, UNODC supported national and local authorities to ensure the provision of essential services to victims of violence against women and girls.

Impact on criminal justice systems

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront and often exacerbated the many challenges facing criminal justice systems and the



14TH UNITED NATIONS CONGRESS ON CRIME PREVENTION AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

KYOTO, JAPAN 7 – 12 MARCH 2021



critical need for effective, integrated responses. Courts are experiencing increased backlogs that delay cases even in gender-based violence cases.

For many women, stay home does not mean stay safe. There is evidence of increasing incidents of gender-based violence during lockdowns but decreased reporting of it. The vulnerability of children already at risk of violence has increased.

Many measures have been taken to control the spread of the virus, often enforced by the police in many countries. Such measures may be justifiable for public health, but they raise concerns about the risk of human rights violations and abuse of power, increased opportunities for corruption and limitations on access to justice, particularly for the poor and marginalized.

The extraordinary risk that COVID-19 is posing in prisons has focused attention on overcrowding which persists in most countries. Restrictions such as prison lockdowns, reduced access and visits, and restricted prison movements, have fueled anxiety among prisoners and staff, with more than 40 countries reporting prison riots. The need to address the systemic neglect of prison services and tackle the causes of overcrowding should be one of the main lessons and a priority for future reform efforts.

Impact on the rule of law

It is essential the principles of the rule of law, integrity, transparency, accountability and human rights continue to be upheld by public institutions. They should have in place accountability, reporting and oversight mechanisms and other measures to prevent corruption and build safeguards.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to education systems leading to an increase in school drop-out rates, reduced opportunities for socialization and limited access to sport and physical activities. All this can generate anxiety and mental health disorders. Existing inequalities in access to education have been amplified during the pandemic.

UNODC's Education for Justice (E4J) programme has continued to deliver activities through virtual

means and identified new opportunities to reach target groups in innovative ways.

Impact on terrorism

COVID-19 has transformed and, in several countries, exacerbated the terrorism threat.

Terrorist groups have seen the uncertainty created by the pandemic as a window of opportunity to exploit the disruption and negative impacts of the pandemic. There has been an increase in terrorist attacks in part of Africa and the Middle East.

The pandemic has impeded efforts to repatriate individuals with suspected links to terrorist groups from conflict zones, including women and children. Services for victims of terrorism have been interrupted, delayed or ended. Resources have been redirected to deal with the health crisis.

UNODC transferred the delivery of its counter-terrorism technical assistance online, training more than 1,000 criminal justice and law enforcement officials since the start of the pandemic.

The pandemic has placed considerable strain on the capacity to detect, prevent and combat transnational organized crime. Home-based working practices have increased the pool of potential cybercrime victims. A growth in crime that exploits communications technologies has been observed, with an escalation of fraud and financial crime risks.

COVID-19 created new criminal opportunities through the increased use of virtual assets; dark web markets have diversified, with scams promoting fake COVID-19 test kits and treatments. There has been a significant increase in sharing of child sexual and exploitation and abuse material.

Lessons to learn from the pandemic for crime prevention and criminal justice

How to ensure effects of the pandemic do not leave young people behind and how to ensure that organized criminal groups do not profit from the expected and necessary international attention to public health, are just two of the questions the 14th UN Crime Congress needs to consider.