Violent crime and drug offences above pre-pandemic levels in most vulnerable areas

Areas hit hardest by job losses face entering “difficult loop” of poverty and crime

Violent crime and drug offences have risen above pre-pandemic levels in deprived areas, new research from the London School of Economics and Political Science reveals.

The authors of the report *Covid-19 and changing crime trends in England and Wales*, published today by LSE’s Centre for Economic Performance (CEP), conclude that job creation policies, as well as targeted policing, are needed to help areas that are particularly vulnerable to rises in crime.

The report shows that during the first lockdown in England and Wales, almost all types of crime fell. The only recorded rises in crime rates were in anti-social behaviour (which includes breaking lockdown restrictions) and drug offences, believed to be due to the lack of people moving around, which made it easier for police to track down dealers. Anti-social behaviour crimes recorded by police were up 35 per cent during lockdown compared with the same time in previous years, while for drug offences the increase was 17 per cent.

As lockdown measures were eased between June and September 2020, crime rates across the country started to rise in most categories but remained below pre-pandemic levels, with only anti-social behaviour remaining at (statistically significantly) higher levels.

But when the researchers analyse employment and crime data within small areas of around 650 households each, they find the average drop overall masked wide variations. In areas where, before the pandemic, higher than average numbers of people had been claiming unemployment benefits, there were year-on-year increases in certain crimes.

Drug offences rose from 0.28 monthly offences per 1,000 population in June-September 2019 to 0.33 in June-September 2020 (an increase of 18 per cent). Similarly, public order offences rose from 0.86 to 0.97 (an increase of 13 per cent), and violent crimes increased from 2.60 to 2.72 in June to September 2020 (up by 5 per cent).

In addition to these rises, areas with both higher claimant levels pre-pandemic and a higher than average increase in claimants during the lockdown saw rates of burglary, shoplifting and theft offences fall by less than they did elsewhere.

Tom Kirchmaier, director of the policing and crime research group at CEP, said: “The most vulnerable areas, those which had higher levels of claimants before Covid, and an above average increase in claimants since March, had higher crime rates in September than average for that month. Importantly, this rise includes public order and
violent crimes – indicating that deprived areas that were already under pressure are now experiencing more social unrest and are at risk of entering a difficult loop of poverty and crime. The decrease in crime that has continued for some after lockdown, may not last for long if a “wave” of social unrest builds up. Understanding these differences could be useful for targeted social policies.”

Carmen Villa-Llera, a research assistant at CEP, said: “Information on which areas are most at risk can help police forces decide where to allocate their officers – but policing resources alone do not solve the problem of rising inequality. Social policy must be co-ordinated and aim for job creation, particularly for those sectors most in need.”

The analysis uses Office for National Statistics data on benefit claimants from 2017 to 2020, which is matched to Police UK crime data for January 2011 to September 2020.


Notes to editors

1. The Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) is an independent research centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Its members are from the LSE and a wide range of universities within the UK and around the world.

2. The Centre for Economic Performance is part-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) https://esrc.ukri.org/ https://www.ukri.org/


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