



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Center for Health & Justice Research

JUNE 2020 | ISSUE 20-C19

IMPACT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING ON CRIME IN INDIANAPOLIS DURING COVID-19

BACKGROUND

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, jurisdictions throughout the United States have implemented social distancing measures meant to curb community spread of the virus. These measures have included closures of nonessential establishments—including schools, restaurants, and bars—and shelter-in-place or stay-at-home orders, often issued at the state level by governors. Without these measures, epidemic forecasts predict that large parts of populations could contract the disease and health care systems could be overwhelmed.^{1,2}

Besides slowing the spread of disease, social distancing can have substantial secondary impacts, including changes in crime. This policy brief summarizes a study that used police calls for service to examine Indianapolis crime trends before and after social distancing measures, including the closure of nonessential establishments and a shelter-in-place order in Indiana.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers analyzed daily counts of police calls for service in Indianapolis, Indiana, from January 2 to April 21, 2020. This period was divided into three parts:

- **January 2 to March 15:** Indiana schools, restaurants, and bars were still open. This is the baseline period.
- **March 16 to March 23:** Indiana schools, restaurants, and bars were closed. This period is not included in the analysis in this brief.
- **March 24 to April 21:** Indiana schools, restaurants, and bars were closed and shelter-in-place orders were in effect.

KEY FINDINGS

Analysis of Indianapolis police calls for service suggests that in the wake of social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

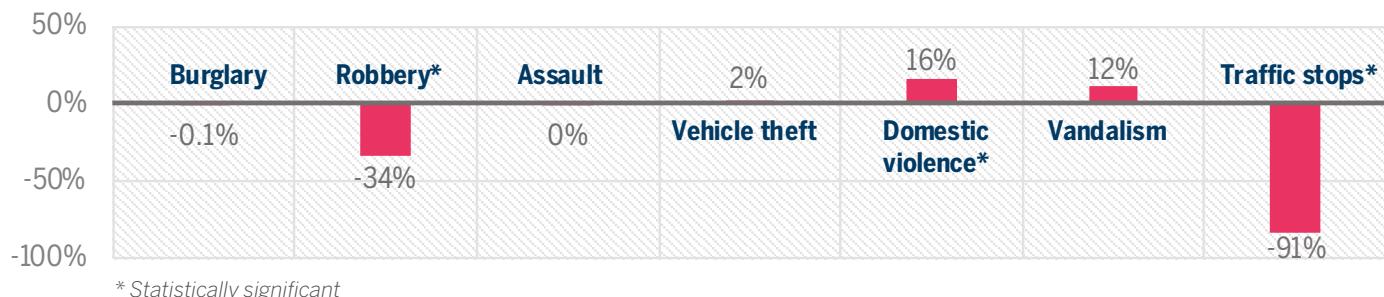
- Domestic violence calls increased
- Traffic stops and robbery calls decreased
- Other types of calls for service remained steady
- Changes in calls for service may have implications for police operations and safety to deal with the ongoing public health crisis

Researchers predicted that the effect of social distancing measures would vary by the type of crime. For instance, robbery, assault/battery, and burglary offenses may decrease because social distancing means fewer people or properties are available to be potential targets for crime. Traffic stops may also decrease with fewer residents leaving their home and greater application of officer discretion to initiate stops. Alternatively, domestic violence offenses may increase due to the likelihood of conflict as social distancing limits opportunities for families and intimate partners to leave their homes. Researchers also explored other crimes where it was unclear whether to expect an increase or decrease (e.g., vehicle theft, vandalism).

FINDINGS

The analysis identified several trends in Indianapolis crime during social distancing for COVID-19 (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Increases and decreases in Indianapolis police calls for service



Indianapolis saw significant increases in domestic violence and vandalism calls following social distancing. Meanwhile, there were significant drops in traffic stops and robbery calls.

However, even though researchers expected social distancing measures to decrease the availability of targets for certain types of crimes, burglary, assault/battery, and vehicle theft calls in Indianapolis remained unchanged after the shelter-in-place order.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increases in domestic violence and vandalism have important implications for police departments who are already navigating challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although crime trends have changed less than researchers expected, given the social, economic, and psychological changes Americans have experienced due to social distancing measures, it will be essential for departments to provide extra support and training for officers responding to an increasing number of complicated and sometimes dangerous domestic violence calls.

This brief was adapted from a peer-reviewed publication on Indianapolis crime trends during COVID-19 authored by Dr. George Mohler, Dr. Jeremy Carter, and their colleagues. A copy of the article is available by request (carterjg@iupui.edu).³

REFERENCES

1. Ferguson N. *Impact of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) to Reduce COVID-19 Mortality and Healthcare Demand* (2020). Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team; 2020. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/sph/ide/gida-fellowships/Imperial-College-COVID19-NPI-modelling-16-03-2020.pdf>. Accessed April 17, 2020.
2. Landler M, Castle S. Behind the Virus Report That Jarred the U.S. and the U.K. to Action. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/world/europe/coronavirus-imperial-college-johnson.html>. Published March 17, 2020. Accessed April 17, 2020.
3. Mohler G., Bertozzi, A. L., Carter, J., et al. (2020). Impact of social distancing during COVID-19 pandemic on crime in Los Angeles and Indianapolis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 68, 101692.



PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

**CENTER FOR HEALTH
& JUSTICE RESEARCH**

The Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) works with public safety agencies, social service organizations, and residents to conduct impartial applied research on public and justice system policy choices. CHJR is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute (PPI), which also supports the Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy (CRISP) and the Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations.

PREPARED BY

Staci Rising, Project Manager, **Beca Stockman**, Research Assistant, and
Courtney Hiles, Research Assistant, with assistance from **Karla Camacho-Reyes**

101 W. Ohio Street, Suite 400
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Phone: (317) 278-1305
Email: iuppi@iu.edu
policyinstitute.iu.edu

Follow us on Twitter
[@IUPublicPolicy](https://twitter.com/IUPublicPolicy)

LinkedIn
[Indiana University Public Policy Institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/indiana-university-public-policy-institute/)