CHAPTER 12

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CRIME

Ruken MACİT¹

¹Asst. Prof, Sociology Department, Harran University, Şanlıurfa, Turkey
e-mail: rukenmacit@harran.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus, which started in Wuhan, China and spread to the whole world, has affected many social phenomena in a short time; undoubtedly one of these social phenomena is crime. The phenomenon of crime, which is as old as humankind, is an important social problem. Since the COVID-19 outbreak which brought life to a standstill, crime rates in many countries have changed remarkably. As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved as a global health, humanitarian and economic crisis, criminals have been quick to seize opportunities to generate significant amounts of profit. While measures were being taken within the framework of COVID-19, including a call to “stay home”, many crime types (burglary, homicide, migrant smuggling) decreased, whereas some (cybercrime, domestic violence) increased. In addition, some types of crime (e.g. the drug trade) were observed to develop new strategies. This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of crime in the world in the epidemic process, both theoretically and statistically. The theoretical framework is based on Criminal Opportunity Theory. According to this theory, criminals are individuals who evaluate the opportunities around them and make rational choices. It is expected that COVID-19 will cause significant changes within several crime types. This research offers a different perspective on the COVID-19 situation, within the framework of the crime phenomenon.

Keywords: Crime, COVID-19, criminal opportunity theory

Introduction

The phenomenon of crime, which is as old as humankind, is an important social problem that every society struggles with today. It has been observed that crime which has a dynamic and changing character, takes new forms and gains different dimensions in modern and postmodern societies. This affects criminals in different ways, forcing them to change their perspectives and leads to new conceptualizations.

The spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has resulted in the most devastating global public health crisis in over a century. The global health crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic has been compounded by political, economic, and social crises. Since December 2019, when the coronavirus disease COVID-19 began its global spread, hundreds of thousands of people have died, millions more have been infected with the virus, and entire economies have come to immediate halt amid government-imposed lockdowns. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, which brought life to a standstill, the change in crime rates in many countries has drawn attention.

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting the world under enormous strain, affecting the lives of everyone. The unprecedented measures adopted to flatten the infection curve include enforced quarantine, curfews and lockdowns, travel restrictions, and limitations on economic activities and public life. As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved as a global health, humanitarian and economic crisis, criminals have been quick to seize opportunities to generate significant amounts of profit (Europol, 2020: 3). Certain types of criminal activity intensified during the pandemic, while others almost ceased. Even during times of crisis, criminal business continued. These developments in crime are not unexpected and mirror the adaptability and flexibility of criminals displayed in other social change situations.

In this research, the criminal opportunity theory is explained and the varying crime rates within COVID-19 context are explored. Second, within the COVID-19 crime types that have changed are explored and analyzed. Finally, the relationship between the criminal opportunity theory and changing crime rates within the COVID-19 context is evaluated.

Criminal Opportunity Theory and COVID-19

As the COVID-19 situation is relatively new, there are very few studies in this field. However, some theories have been widely used to explain the temporal changes in crime rates. One of these theories is the criminal opportunity theory. In this context, the criminal opportunity theory is appropriate to explain the change in crime rates during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The term “opportunity” has been familiarized in criminology in relation to the anomic theory that the restricted socio-economic opportunities open to working-class youths encourage illegitimate solutions to the problems associated with acquiring wealth and status (Merton, 1957; Cloward & Ohlin, 1961). The theorists mentioned have stressed the importance of situational rather than motivational factors in explaining crime. Criminal opportunity theory suggests that offenders make rational choices and choose targets that offer a high reward for little effort and associated risk. Mayhew, Clarke, Sturman and Hough (1976) were the first to point out the necessary conditions for crime to occur and call them criminal opportunities. According to this theory, criminals are individuals who evaluate the opportunities around them and make rational choices.

Cohen and Felson (1979) think that the increase in crime rates in the USA beginning in the 1960s can be explained by the changes in people’s lifestyles and specifically the changes that people had to make to their routines and social lives. They state that there was a relationship between the participation of women in the labor force, which left many houses empty during the day, and theft. According to Cohen and Felson (1979), three elements must be present at the same time and place for a crime to occur: A motivated attacker, a suitable target and a lack or absence of supervisors and/or guardians who can protect the target from the attacker. Crime occurs when these three elements intersect at the same time and place. All crimes require opportunity but not every opportunity results in a crime.

As an example, comparing of the United States to other nations underscores the role of guns as facilitators of homicide and aggravated assault. Homicide rates in the United States are much higher than in Britain and other European nations. This is not because the United States is a more criminal society. If it were, rates for other crimes such as car theft and burglary would also be higher when, in fact, they are lower than in Britain and some other countries in Europe. Rather, the high homicide rates in the United States result from the widespread availability of handguns, which means that the opportunity to carry out a quick but deadly attack is much greater, even when the victim is stronger than the attacker. Drug dealing and vice also depend upon opportunity. For example, drug sellers in the United States seek apartment buildings that have no building manager on the premises. Through redesign, management and patrol, drug markets have been driven out of parks and shopping malls (Felson and Clarke, 1998)

The criminal opportunity theory sets aside social, psychological and economic factors that push individuals to commit crime and focuses on the physical and environmental factors that make it difficult to commit a crime. Therefore it is suitable for explaining changes in crime rates during the COVID-19 period.

Changes in Crime Types During the COVID-19 Outbreak

The coronavirus, which started in Wuhan, China and spread to the whole world, has affected many social phenomena in a short time; undoubtedly one of these social phenomena is crime. Extraordinary changes have been observed. Some in the types of crime occurring: the rates of some types of crime have decreased while others have increased considerably. In this section, we will first consider the decreasing crime types of burglary, homicide and human trafficking. Second, we will examine the increase in cybercrimes and sexual abuse. Then we will analyze how the drug market, which is always active, has changed its strategy during COVID-19.

Burglary

There has been a noticeable reduction in theft during COVID-19. As confirmed by information provided by police departments. Ashby (2020) gathered data from eight large cities in the United States: Austin, Boston, Chicago, Louisville, Memphis, Nashville, and Los Angeles. A full analysis was not available for all of these cities. But burglary data showed a decline in Austin, Los Angeles, Memphis, and San Francisco. A New York Times article (Eligon and MacFarquhar, 2020) stated that there were half as many arrests between March 24 and April 14, 2020, as over the same period in 2019.

According to information compiled from the Istanbul Police Department, an average of 35 cases of theft per day in Istanbul decreased to 15. There was also a decrease in the number of citizens calling the 155 Police Emergency Line. When a large number of Istanbul residents concerned about the spread of the coronavirus stayed at home, there was 37% decrease in the rates of crimes such as theft and extortion (Koyuncu, 2020). The data shows that theft has decreased considerably with COVID-19.

Homicide

American homicide rates declined dramatically in April and May, presumably as a result of coronavirus business closures and stay-in-place orders. Using crime data from 64 U.S. cities, the researchers found that homicide rates declined by 21.5 % in April and 9.9 % in May compared to the previous three-year average for those months. According to Rosenfeld, et al. (2020) that it all boils down to the level of public activity. Homicides depend on relatively vibrant activity patterns — lots of people on the street. When the streets are empty, the opportunities for all kinds of street crime go down. The notable exception is domestic

homicide, but overall we should expect homicide rates to decline as the streets are emptied and businesses close. High levels of unemployment also tend to coincide with lower levels of crime. They saw that during the Great Depression and the Great Recession. But as activity patterns go back to normal, we should expect these types of crime to begin going back up.”

In Latin American countries, where crime rates are the highest in the world, it was determined that there was a serious decrease in murder rates. In recent years, there have been 600 murders per day were in El Salvador, this number dropped to 2 during the epidemic.

In Peru, the crime rate decreased by 84 % compared to last year. In Istanbul, due to the call to stay at home as part of new coronavirus measures, there was a 40 % reduction in incidents of murder (Koyuncu, 2020).

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its contribution, focuses on the impact of the pandemic on homicide and drug trafficking around the globe. Data on homicide trends show that in the months of March to mid-April 2020 homicide levels remained stable or slightly decreased in Central America. This could be linked to different lockdown regimes but can also be explained by the fact that the main actors, such as organized crime and youth gangs, continued, at least in this phase, to operate violently (UNODC, 2020). Data also shows that in countries with low levels of homicide, intensity of lockdown measures seems to have drastically reduced violence.

Migrant Smuggling

While it is impossible to know for certain how many irregular migrants use the services of smugglers, it is increasingly recognized that the majority of the world’s 30 million migrants will have used the services of smugglers at some point in their journey.

According to Bird (2020), prior to the pandemic, the securitization of the migration landscape was shown to drive migrants’ reliance on smuggling networks and increase protection risks on the migrant trail. New evidence points to the exacerbation of these trends by COVID-19-driven securitization. Currently, some smugglers have been reluctant to operate out of fear of contagion, resulting in a pause in irregular movement, but this situation is likely to be only temporary.

According to Europol, migratory flows were reduced during the COVID-19 lockdown. A loosening of travel and movement restrictions is likely to result in an increase in the movements of irregular migrants, both facilitated and unfacilitated, as they have been largely unable to make further movements during the lockdown. There may be further changes

in the most common *modi operandi* to smuggle migrants similar to the current switch from crossing green borders between border crossing points (BCPs) to increasingly using concealments in vehicles to cross the EU's external border at BCPs (Europol, 2020: 8). Also, migrants have been stigmatized in some areas as potential carriers of the virus, with some communities actively opposing their presence. Such stigmatization could potentially harden into longerlasting antipathy towards migrants that persists.

Cybercrimes

During the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement authorities across the EU noted a sharp increase in cybercrime offences. The nature of the cybercrime threat has also evolved throughout the crisis: what were initially simple phishing and malware attacks have become more sophisticated and complex since the pandemic arrived in Europe (Europol, 2020, p. 5). It has been observed that cybercriminals were actively recruiting collaborators in the early weeks of the crisis to orchestrate largescale phishing campaigns and maximize the impact of their attacks.

The International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) recently issued a global threat assessment on crime and policing to its 194 member countries. This highlighted a marked increase of cyber threats connected with malicious domains, malware and ransomware. (Crisanto and Prenio, 2020). The *modi operandi* associated with certain types of cyber-attacks also changed. For instance, the cybercriminals shortened the period between the initial infection with ransomware and the activation of the ransomware attack not waiting for an ideal moment to launch the attack but trying as soon as possible to maximise profits (Europol, 2020, p. 5).

Domestic Violence

Increases in interpersonal violence during times of crisis are well documented, but wide underreporting has made response and data gathering a challenge: less than 40 % of women who experience violence seek any help or report the crime. Of those women who do seek help, less than 10 % go to the police.

However, early data shows that helplines in Singapore and Cyprus have registered a more than 30 % increase in calls. 40 % of frontline workers in New South Wales reported more requests for help with violence. In France, domestic violence cases have increased by 30 % since the lockdown on March 17. In Argentina, emergency calls for domestic violence have

increased by 25 % since the lockdown on March 20 (United Nations, 2020). While there were 1804 domestic violence incidents in Istanbul in March 2019, the number of incidents increased to 2493 in the same month of this year, an increase of 38.2 % compared to last year (Koyuncu, 2020).

Drug Markets: Criminals Don't Take Breaks

Although there are UN intergovernmental bodies put in place to address key illicit market challenges posed by the pandemic and its aftermath, many of these have, ironically, had their operations upended by the pandemic. Serious and organized crime is exploiting the changing circumstances during the pandemic.

“The feedback I’m getting is that they aren’t able to move, to sell anything anywhere,” said Joseph Lopez, a criminal lawyer in Chicago who represents reputed drug dealers. But while narcotics arrests are down, drug sales continue, with dealers likely forced to change their strategies, said Rodney Phillips, a former gang member in Chicago who now works as a conflict mediator in the city. “These guys already face poverty and death in these areas,” he said. “They might be selling more online now. But they aren’t going to give up just because of the coronavirus.” (Dazio, S. et al, 2020).

According to Reuters’ report, smugglers whose movement area was restricted were quoted as using “service to homes or cars” for delivery. It was also learned that, when both the smugglers and the customers could not leave the house due to the restrictions, the growing of cannabis in the house increased (Euronews, 2020). European Union’s Law Enforcement Agency (Europol) stated that focusing on specific areas of criminal activity, they expected little mid- to long-term impact on the trade of illegal drugs. Drug markets are resilient and adaptable. (Europol, 2020: 8). Apparently, the drug market is a crime type that develops different strategies during COVID-19. Even this situation reveals how its structure is different from other crime types.

Conclusion

Crime statistics show that COVID-19 has a strong impact on crime behavior. The call to “stay home” during COVID-19 revealed changes in crime behavior that often appear in times of war and economic depression. Many crime types (burglary, homicide, migrant smuggling) decreased, whereas some (cybercrime, domestic violence) increased. In addition, some types of crime (e.g. the drug trade) were observed to develop new strategies.

According to the data, crimes such as burglary, homicide and migrant smuggling decreased during the epidemic period. With the criminals who committed these crimes, restricted by COVID-19 measures, opportunities to commit the crimes disappeared or decreased. All crimes require opportunity. These crimes have been reduced due to the fact that the criminals did not have the opportunity to commit crime during the epidemic period.

Crimes such as cybercrime and domestic violence increased in the epidemic period. Undoubtedly, opportunity is also very important in these crime types. During this period specifically, people have had to make significant changes to their routines and social lives; thus, it is a great opportunity for cyber criminals to be at home and to carry out most of their work on the computer. In domestic violence, there is the fact that individuals are constantly at home. The “necessary conditions for crime” for violent criminals exist in these cases. It is no surprise that the drug market has developed new strategies such as “online sales” because it has a structure that adapts to all kinds of changes over time. During COVID-19, the data shows that there is a relationship between opportunity and crime. Criminal opportunity theory tells us that crime can be interpreted in terms of exposure to risk. Crime is most likely to occur when likely offenders converge in space and time with suitable crime targets in the absence of capable guardians against crime.

Opportunity theory seek to explain the occurrence of crime rather than simply the existence of criminal dispositions. It emphasizes the fundamental element in the criminal act of opportunity: how this arises, how it is perceived, evaluated and acted on by those with criminal dispositions. The theoretical framework of the study was based on this theory instead of other crime theories, as criminal dispositions changed rather than rational choice during the Covid-19.

As a result, the COVID-19 epidemic era has caused significant changes in crime phenomena as it has in many areas of life. Epidemic life has affected criminals as well as everyone else. It is hard to know whether these changes will be short-term or permanent. All that can be said right now is that more research is needed to understand the long-term effects.

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