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## Seeing the increased crime rate in India as an Aftermath of Covid-19

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*In November 2019 a contagious respiratory disease called COVID-19 appeared for the first time in China, and soon a global health emergency was declared by the World Health Organisation. The COVID-induced lockdown had wide ramifications in almost every realm of life. With soaring levels of inflation and unemployment, it left an indelible stamp on the economic sector and slit open the ramshackle condition of health infrastructure. However, some of its repercussions are still left undermined one of which is how COVID led to an increase in the crime rate in India. Post-COVID the crime rate against women in India touched new heights with numerous occurrences of cybercrimes also being reported. COVID also took a toll on mental health conditions especially that of youngsters with suicide cases being reported in a multitude. The situation created by the COVID pandemic provided optimum conditions for the growth of the crime rate in the avatar of economy-based impediments, psychological disorders, and the negative milieu created. The issue of crime can be seen as a huge obstruction to social welfare and development and needs to be addressed.*

**Keywords:** *covid-19, crime rate, economy-based impediments, psychological disorders, negative social environment.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The so-called Chinese virus, the name with which this virus was christened by the Indian media, was for the first time came to light in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Surrounded by various conspiracy theories of having its origin in a lab, a bioweapon made by China various reports, on the contrary, point to its zoonotic emergence from the “Huanan market in Wuhan”<sup>1</sup>. The knowledge about its emergence is still a missing piece of the puzzle but what should be more underscored is the havoc this virus has created in these three years. This health emergency split wide open the ramshackle condition of the health sector and its aftermaths have an indelible stamp on almost every sphere of human life, with the world economy plunging to an abysmally low level, declining trade, a staggering level of unemployment, stringent lockouts. When talking about India where one of the world’s most stringent was enforced imageries of empty-stomached migrant workers walking to their native places on foot immediately flash before one’s eyes. Long queues for the elementary essentials for life were a common phenomenon. People were seen dying in the queue while waiting to get admitted to the hospitals. With no logs of wood left for cremation and scenes of dead bodies floating in the rivers, India faced its worst health crisis. But all this can be seen as only conspicuous repercussions of COVID with many tacit still under the cover, one of which is how COVID and the lockdown imposed have led to an increase in crime in India. In layman’s terms, anything which is in contravention of the law can be defined as a crime. It is punishable by the government and is opposed to public order and morality.

## CRIME TRENDS POST-COVID

According to recently published data from National Crime Record Bureau, there was an increase in the count of registered crimes in “2020 by 28% compared to 2019”<sup>2</sup>. On one hand, a sudden

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<sup>1</sup> Ramya Kannan, ‘What Do We Know about Covid-19’s Origin’ (*The Hindu*, 31 July 2022) <<https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/explained-what-do-we-know-about-covid-19s-origins/article65702624.ece>> accessed 02 December 2022

<sup>2</sup> Vignesh Radhakrishnan, ‘With Awareness Levels Increasing in Urban Pockets, Cyber Criminals Now Target Non-Metro Areas’ (*The Hindu*, 9 September 2021) <<https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-with-awareness-levels-increasing-in-urban-pockets-cyber-criminals-now-target-non-metro-areas/article65867590.ece>> accessed 04 December 2022

increment can be seen under “Section 188 of IPC”<sup>3</sup>, dealing with the violation of lockdown norms, violent crimes dwindled. However an upsurge of “500% in cybercrimes”<sup>4</sup> cannot be overlooked. All around the world an augmentation in the number of instances of “fraud related to credit/debit cards, OTP, online banking, and ATMs”<sup>5</sup> was widely seen but such reporting of cybercrime can only be considered the tip of the iceberg in contrast to the “domestic violence complaints poised at a 10-year high”<sup>6</sup>. The number of “registered cases of crime against women saw a spike of 64.5 in 2021 from 56.5 in 2020”<sup>7</sup> and a surge of “15.3% in 2021 in the crime rate against women”<sup>8</sup>. Suicide, seen as a grave health concern and is a more serious issue when committed by youngsters “accounted for 36.6% and 24.3% of the global suicide deaths in women and men, respectively”<sup>9</sup>. “There has been a significant increase in the proportion of working children from 28.2% to 79.6% mainly because of the COVID pandemic and the closure of schools”<sup>10</sup> with “child labour increasing to around 280% among the vulnerable communities”<sup>11</sup>.

## FACTORS THAT LED TO AN INCREASE IN THE CRIME RATE

“Social welfare and development”<sup>12</sup>, both of which are associated with ameliorating “the quality of life, the issue of crime should be investigated”<sup>13</sup>. It is crucial to study the factors that led to

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> ‘Cybercrime Went up by 500% during Pandemic: Chief of Defence Staff’ (*The Hindu*, 12 November 2021) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/cybercrime-went-up-by-500-per-cent-during-pandemic-chief-of-defence-staff/article37457504.ece>> accessed 04 December 2022

<sup>5</sup> Vignesh Radhakrishnan, ‘With Awareness Levels Increasing in Urban Pockets, Cyber Criminals Now Target Non-Metro Areas’ (*The Hindu*, 9 September 2021) <<https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-with-awareness-levels-increasing-in-urban-pockets-cyber-criminals-now-target-non-metro-areas/article65867590.ece>> accessed 04 December 2022

<sup>6</sup> Vignesh Radhakrishnan (n 2)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Soumitra Pathare et al., ‘Analysis of news media reports of suicides and attempted suicides during the COVID-19 lockdown in India’ (2020) *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-020-00422-2>> accessed 05 December 2022.

<sup>10</sup> PA Narayani, ‘Child Labour Increased during COVID-19: Survey’ (*The Hindu*, 12 March 2021) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/child-labour-increased-during-covid-19-survey/article34054623.ece>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> Prashansa Srivastava, ‘Crime, Unemployment and Society in India: Insights from Rape Data’ (2019) 06(2) *Indian J. Soc. & Pol.* <<http://www.ijsp.in/admin/mvc/upload/60211%20CRIME%20UNEMPLOYMENT%20AND%20SOCIETY%20IN%20INDIA.pdf>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

crime trends to gain insights that have both “substantive and practical implications”<sup>14</sup>. Multiple factors may be useful for explaining “crime trends, including economy-based impeded”<sup>15</sup>, psychological disorders, and “negative social environment”<sup>16</sup> in light of COVID.

The inclusion of economic factors into the realm of criminology has always been an imperative question with criminologists often in the doldrums over this issue because of the perceived complications in the study of economics. However, considering the economy as a keystone of social structure and its potency to alter behavioural patterns it had to be included. Unemployment in addition to causing income loss can cause grave psychological harm and hence can be used as an imperative factor to measure crime trends.<sup>17</sup>

To understand the impact of unemployment on the crime rate the linkage between two discrete and proportionate results of unemployment on crime namely, “the motivation effect and the opportunity effect”<sup>18</sup> may be used. This linkage efficiently portrays the association between “criminal motivation theories and criminal opportunity theories”<sup>19</sup>. The former presents that unemployment leads to increased income stress which ultimately provokes individuals to commit crimes to maintain their standard of living. The ill effects of unemployment can also be felt psychologically, which can be looked upon as frustration to maintain employment or their standard of living. The latter depicts that unemployment leads to diminished social engagement which ultimately nudges an increase in the chances of their involvement in criminal activities.

Myriad people encounter episodes of “feeling scared, depressed, or uninspired”<sup>20</sup>. “These emotions can be fleeting for some people and eventually go away; for others, however, they can linger and cause serious anguish, which can influence how they act, think, and feel. A mental

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Prashansa Srivastava (n 12)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Emilie Green, ‘Mental Illness and Violence: Is There a Link?’ (*ICJIA*, 4 May 2020)

<<https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/mental-illness-and-violence-is-there-a-link>> accessed 03 December 2022

illness may be identified when these changes start to negatively impact daily life.”<sup>21</sup> In analyzing the linkage between crime and psychological disorders two prevailing notions need to be considered, first, the “criminalization of mental illness is a repercussion of deinstitutionalization and second, mentally ill persons are more likely to commit crimes”<sup>22</sup>. In this scenario, we will be focusing on the latter one. Mental illness encompasses a wide arena of conditions that have the potency “to have a large impact on an individual’s emotions and the way they interact within the society”<sup>23</sup>. Episodes of anxiety and extreme anger can lead to increased odds of acting violently due to intense anger or impulsivity.

“Environment and social interaction have a key role in shaping the behaviour of an individual”<sup>24</sup>. It includes a plethora of other factors like physical, social, family, community, economic, cultural, and political environments in which individuals live. Environment and social factors have a huge role to play in an individual’s upbringing, with various pieces of research bolstering the fact, an “impoverished family environment including poverty, isolation in social support and being raised in a violent family structure gives a risk environment of being developing a criminal behaviour”<sup>25</sup>.

## HOW COVID HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THESE FACTORS

Since 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020, when one of the world’s strictest lockdowns was first the unemployment rate stood at a meagre rate of 7% which has sharply augmented to 27.11%<sup>26</sup> in the post-COVID era. “Alarming figures of unemployment have been recurrent even before the huge dislocation

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Teresa L Scheid & Tony N Brown, *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems* (2nd edn, Cambridge University Press 2012)

<sup>23</sup> ‘Mental Illness and Crime: What’s the Link?’ (*Gallant Law*, 18 November 2019)

<<https://www.gallantlaw.com.au/mental-illness-and-crime-whats-the-link/>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>24</sup> Joel Mathew Jose, ‘Crime Is the Result of Social and Environmental Factors and Not on Biological Factors’ (2021) 10 *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>26</sup> ‘India’s Unemployment Rate Rises to 27.11% amid COVID-19 Crisis: CMIE’ (*The Hindu*, 5 May 2020)

<<https://www.thehindu.com/business/indias-unemployment-rate-rises-to-2711-amid-covid-19-crisis-cmie/article61660838.ece>> accessed 03 December 2022

unleashed by lockdowns imposed in 2020-21 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic"<sup>27</sup> but the lockdown aggravated it. "With activity restrained, job losses have climbed which has ultimately dampened family incomes"<sup>28</sup> leading to many people falling below the poverty line. "A report from Azim Premji University's Centre for Sustainable Employment, titled 'State of Working India 2021, One year of COVID-19', showed that on average, households lost about 22% of their cumulative income over eight months ended October 2020. Also, poorer households lost a larger proportion of their already low incomes"<sup>29</sup>. The issue of high demand and low supply has led to soaring values of inflation with "India's CPI inflation fluctuating around a high level"<sup>30</sup> and "remaining at a high level of over 6% since April 2020"<sup>31</sup>.

In addition to being "a great disruptor of people's lives with its uncertainties and the economic recessions"<sup>32</sup>, the aftermaths of COVID can also be felt psychologically, with "a 25% increase in anxiety and depression among people"<sup>33</sup> worldwide, for the "very first time being hit by a virus with such high mortality, and the never experienced lockdown, "the widespread job insecurity among the youth"<sup>34</sup> and uncertainty about future"<sup>35</sup> can be identified as conspicuous causes of the same. Instances of psychological disorders were also reported among children with the "transition from having a routine, familiar school environment and playing, to having no friends to spend time with and being confined at home to blame. With 'depression and anxiety are

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<sup>27</sup> Maya John, 'The Era of an Unemployed India' (*The Hindu*, 28 March 2022) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-era-of-an-unemployed-india/article65265303.ece>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>28</sup> K Bharat Kumar, 'How Will the Bleak Employment Conditions Impact the Recovery Prospects of the Indian Economy?' (*The Hindu*, 23 May 2020) <<https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/explained-how-will-the-bleak-employment-conditions-impact-the-recovery-prospects-of-the-indian-economy/article60681619.ece>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>30</sup> C Rangarajan, 'Control Inflation by Acting on Liquidity' (*The Hindu*, 11 May 2022) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/control-inflation-by-acting-on-liquidity/article65402231.ece>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>32</sup> 'World Mental Health Day | Experts Underline Need for More Psychiatrists, Early Identification' (*The Hindu*, 9 October 2022) <<https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/depression-remains-a-neglected-global-health-crisis-report/article65056889.ece>> accessed 03 December 2022

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>34</sup> Cybercrime Went up by 500% during Pandemic: Chief of Defence Staff (n 4)

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

estimated to cost the global economy \$1 trillion each year and an estimated 15% of working-age adults have a mental disorder at any point”<sup>36</sup> in time it becomes more vital to address this issue.

The COVID-induced lockdown enlivened a new concept of work-from-home which led to widespread isolation and much disengagement from work and colleagues. This diminished social participation leads to a loss of sense of identity and sense of value and created an atmosphere of negativity and pessimism. The prevailing fear of catching an infection or their family member getting infected and the psychological distress caused by losing loved ones created a milieu of melancholy and bleakness. Horrifying scenes were reported from cremation grounds with no logs left and imageries of floating dead bodies added to the woes.

### **HOW THESE FACTORS HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE CRIME RATE?**

The “shadow pandemic of violence against women with domestic violence”<sup>37</sup> in much limelight saw a sudden spike in COVID-induced lockdown, a tool to practice social distancing. While social distancing had obvious health benefits by restraining the spread of the virus it nudged the victims and abusers to spend more time together thereby creating more opportunities for violence. With rising unemployment and job losses “the proportion of the population feeling frustrated and stressed will increase”<sup>38</sup>. “The overall effect of an increased level of frustration and emotional stress in the population would result in an increased rate of domestic violence”.<sup>39</sup> “The ramifications of job loss also depend on the gender of the partner who lost the job. If the woman loses her job then, she is more likely to be victimized. But if the man loses his job, then he is less likely to perpetrate violence”.<sup>40</sup> When a male has low prospects of future earnings he is more likely to conceal his “violent predisposition since the female would have a strong

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>37</sup> Irene George & Moly Kuruvilla, ‘Gendered Experiences of COVID-19 in India’ (2021) Springer International Publishing <<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-85335-8>> accessed 02 December 2022

<sup>38</sup> Prashansa Srivastava (n 12)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Sonia Bhalotra, ‘A Shadow Pandemic of Domestic Violence: The Potential Role of Job Loss and Unemployment Benefits’ (*Centre for Economic Policy Research*, 13 November 2020) <<https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/shadow-pandemic-domestic-violence-potential-role-job-loss-and-unemployment-benefits>> accessed 02 December 2022



proposition"<sup>41</sup> to leave him if she learns about it. On the other hand, if the woman loses her job the man has no such incentive to conceal his "violent nature and has a lesser tendency to leave him even if she learns about it".<sup>42</sup> The number of the job losses is commensurate in both the genders but it is the women who face the brunt of job losses in the form of domestic violence from the partner. It "also challenges gender stereotypes by changing the relative earnings of the man, and domestic violence can emerge as a manifestation of male backlash".<sup>43</sup>

The COVID pandemic gave an immense opportunity for greater diversification of crime due to the diminished offender-victim physical encounter. One of its subsets is cybercrimes. The lockdown provoked people to work from home and increased the proportion of "people relying on technology and the use of social media, people used to spend a greater time on the internet"<sup>44</sup> making them more prone to falling prey to these crimes. Cyberspace may also be tempting for unemployed youth as cyber frauds can also help find an "alternative means of support"<sup>45</sup>. This leads to an "increased presence of motivated offenders in cyberspace during the pandemic, which subsequently leads to an increase in overall rates of cyber victimization".<sup>46</sup>

The COVID pandemic "increased self-harm and suicidality with fear, financial crisis"<sup>47</sup>, and negative environment as the main causes to blame. The "dual vulnerability to suicide"<sup>48</sup> can be recognized as "mental health disorders and infection"<sup>49</sup>. The death rate associated with COVID

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<sup>41</sup> Dan Anderberg et al., 'Unemployment and Domestic Violence: Theory and Evidence' (2016) 126(597) *The Economic Journal* <<https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12246>> accessed 01 December 2022

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>44</sup> David Vuil-Gil, 'Cybercrime and Shifts in Opportunities during COVID-19: A Preliminary Analysis in the UK' (2020) 23(1) *European Societies* <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1804973>> accessed 01 December 2022

<sup>45</sup> James Hawdon et al., 'Cybercrime in America amid COVID-19: The Initial Results from a Natural Experiment' (2020) 45 *American Journal of Criminal Justice* <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09534-4>> accessed 01 December 2022

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>47</sup> Debanjan Banerjee et al., "'The Dual Pandemic' of Suicide and COVID-19: A Biopsychosocial Narrative of Risks and Prevention' (2021) *Psychiatry Research* <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113577>> accessed 02 December 2022

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*



is low but “the fear of the outcome and stigma attached to it, often make people distressed, thus leading to impulsive decisions”.<sup>50</sup>

The frontline workers considered the backbone in this fight against COVID also faced the brunt physically and psychologically. The guilt of transmitting the infection to their loved ones, the peril of infection, augmented work pressure, and heartening scenes of death gave rise to “feelings of depression, frustration, and eventually suicide”.<sup>51</sup> Other than a concern about the severity of the disease, the elderly also encountered loneliness and depression due to quarantine. Existence crises such as being stranded alone at home without any domestic help may provoke suicidal tendencies. The cohabiting of couples for a longer duration due to the lockdown may also uncover pre-existing marital disputes leading to domestic violence and abuse by the partner. The under-reporting of such instances of violence due to “fear of legal hassles, and acceptance may exacerbate underlying untreated depression which can lead to suicides”<sup>52</sup>. Lastly, the COVID pandemic has led to soaring levels of unemployment and numerous small-scale industries remaining shut leading to much financial distress. This “increased uncertainty shadowing the future”<sup>53</sup> can be termed another risk factor ultimately leading to an increased rate of suicidality.

The lockdown clandestinely relocated many children from schools “to farms and factories thereby exacerbating the vermin of child labour”,<sup>54</sup> a more common phenomenon in the migrant communities. The plight of migrant workers came to light by the sudden lockdown imposed which nudged the children to step out for an “additional source of income to the family”<sup>55</sup>. The maximum brunt of the pandemic was predominantly faced by the lower strata of society who have a greater tendency to have “more children who start to contribute economically from an early age”<sup>56</sup> to equalize the cost of raising them which surpasses the diminished family income.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>54</sup> Navpreet Kaur & Roger W Byard, ‘Prevalence and Potential Consequences of Child Labour in India and the Possible Impact of COVID-19 – a Contemporary Overview’ (2021) 61 *Medicine, Science and the Law* 208

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

The children also entered the workforce due to the untimely demise of a breadwinner due to COVID infection or to evade the abuse tormented either by the frustrated parents or by step-parents.

## **CONCLUSION**

The fundamental question in this paper was to analyse the linkage between the COVID pandemic and the increasing crime rate. The graveness of the issue of the increasing crime rate cannot be emphasized enough and all possible solutions should be resorted to. Though a complete lockdown was crucial in preventing the spread of the disease however its ill effects cannot be undermined. It led to the Indian economy coming to standstill leaving no source of income for the Indian population. Due to decreased economic activity, decreased workload, and uncertainty about the future companies have been firing their existing employees and are hesitant to recruit new candidates leading to a sudden surge in the unemployment rate. In light of the COVID pandemic, the biggest cause of an increase in the crime rate can be seen as unemployment and job losses. In the past also various instances of the association between unemployment and crime can be underscored. The onus is now on the government to alleviate employment opportunities. The issue of unemployment must be adequately responded to by various schemes and like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to deter the general public to venture into criminal activities necessary for their basic needs. The increased crime in light of the pandemic is also a clarion call to underscore the much-undermined issue of mental health. With October 10 being declared World Mental Health Day the need to enlighten people about the same persists. A healthy individual is an imperative component of a healthy society and also plays a huge role in restraining crime. The invisible aftermaths of fake news and rumours and promoters of the negative environment that blanketed during the COVID period should also be emphasized. The propagators of fake news should be dealt with an iron hand and there is a much need for non-partisan laws for the regulation of the same. The issue of such a bill remaining in Parliament is concerning and needs to be addressed. The above-mentioned steps are crucial to restraining the public from entering criminal activities which are necessary to bolster India on its path to a 5 trillion economy.