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# AiPOL

Australasian Institute of Policing

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## COVID-19 CONTAGION CRIME AUSTRALIA

Part 2 of the COVID-19 series





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# Editorial

## DR AMANDA DAVIES

Editor, Assistant Professor Policing and Security at the Rabdan Academy, Abu Dhabi



*One of the clear messages which emerges is the strength of our police leaders, their decision making capacity and how they communicate the way forward will be critical if policing is to lead at the forefront of community safety for the future.*

Welcome to the second issue in the COVID-19 pandemic series. There is little doubt the world is grappling with a problem the size and impact of which continues to consume our daily lives and those on the frontline in many professions. Chief amongst those with mandates with enforcing COVID-19 policies and procedures within the community and nation are our police officers. It is the additional law enforcement responsibility in the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the changing landscape of criminality that has police forces world wide rapidly reallocating human, fiscal and physical resources. Questions which are of concern for, not only our police leaders, our government and our people is what will 'normal' look like post COVID-19? And in the reality of today, when will post-COVID-19 occur? Will crime patterns return to the pre-COVID-19 pattern or continue in a changed state?

Whilst think tanks, practitioners, futurists, scientists and subject matter

experts are all contributing to finding the best way forward the lessons from the past on which we heavily rely are based in a less technological advanced state – is this an advantage or disadvantage? How can our advances in technology help the world through the COVID-19 pandemic? What we do know in the global policing domain is that technology has provided the means through which an ever-increasing criminal fraternity can continue their illegal business. The lockdowns as a measure to curb the spread of COVID-19 have, as widely reported, and discussed in the articles in this issue, brought more criminals off the street and onto the online landscape of crime.

There is a building library of literature available in the public domain focused on the many areas of personal, national and global security and the connectivity with the pandemic and its influence on these pivotal areas of life. Unfortunately, we have already seen the tragedies unfolding, not only in the medical field,

also the wider ramifications of an increase in, but not limited to, domestic violence, mental health illness, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, drug and alcohol dependency and related violence. These are not new areas for policing, their levels have accelerated at a time when policing is under pressure to provide the level of community security the world, in the main, has turned to for support.

The articles in this issue collectively offer insight into perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on the changing crime landscape. One of the clear messages which emerges is the strength of our police leaders, their decision making capacity and how they communicate the way forward will be critical if policing is to lead at the forefront of community safety for the future.

As the world moves forward one day at a time confronting and managing the pandemic crisis, we will seek to clear a path through the media overload to provide articles which inform on key policing issues impacted by COVID-19.





# Contagion, Crime, Pandemic and Policing

**JON HUNT-SHARMAN**

President, Committee of Management, Australasian Institute of Policing

Over the last nine months, the Australasian Institute of Policing (Aipol) has closely monitored the impact of COVID-19 on the illicit economy, from an Australian perspective.

It is evident that the impact of COVID-19 on crime is an issue that needs to be closely analysed by relevant agencies both globally and domestically.

It is apparent that COVID-19 is not just a public-health emergency and a financial crisis but has far-reaching consequences for current and future policing. The implications and the legacy of the pandemic are likely to be far-reaching and 'game changing'.

Illicit economies have changed, criminal actors have adapted, and policing has been so focused on reacting to the pandemic and the subsequent public emergency, that there has been little time for policing agencies to analyse and adapt to the new criminal environment.

Australia is very fortunate that a number of federally funded 'national focused' agencies are well placed to obtain relevant data, analyse and respond in a timely manner, on the changes to the criminal environment. This will enable Australian policing and law enforcement to implement effective strategies in a changed new world. The key 'nationally focused' federally funded agencies include:

- Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) established in 2018;
- Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission established in 2016;
- Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC) established in 2014;
- Australian Securities & Investment Commission (ASIC) established in 2001;

- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) established in 1995;
- Austrac established in 1989; and
- Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) established in 1972.

## COVID-19 and Crime

Although we are awaiting detailed and validated data in relation to the effect of COVID-19 on organised crime, general crime and policing, some clear observations can be made at this time, based on public reports, media releases, academic papers etc.

## Cybercrime

There has been considerable surge in cybercrime. A combination of factors, including a shift to remote working,



the use of unsecure networks, and an increasingly vulnerable population due to health and financial concerns, has created the perfect storm for online fraudsters, drug dealers, child exploitation syndicates, extortionists and sophisticated cybercriminals, including State based cyber actors.

### **Illicit Wildlife Trade**

COVID-19 is having a positive and negative impact on the illicit wildlife trade and other forms of environmental crime. As outlined in Part 1 of the COVID-19 series, the novel coronavirus originated in China, which is one of the most important players in the trafficking of illegal wildlife products. Restrictions on air travel in and out of China is having a serious impact on the demand for various environmental products originating in Africa, including the most trafficked form of endangered fauna and flora in the world, including pangolins, the alleged source of COVID-19.

On one hand, it appears as though the trafficking of wildlife products is facing many of the same impediments as other illicit markets, not least the reduction in demand as a result of travel restrictions in and out of a number of source and destination countries. For example, in South Africa, government officials report a significant decline in rhino poaching incidents and smuggling of pangolins to Asia since the beginning of the lockdown. However, on the other hand, there has been an increase in illegal logging activity reported in several countries around the world.

### **Illicit Drug Trade**

The global drug trade is one of the most adaptable to COVID-19. From the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, speculation was rife over the impending collapse of this illegal drug industry, at least in the short term.

On the one hand, lockdown measures are proving problematic to actors in the global drug trade, with some suppliers forced to ship larger quantities of drugs in anticipation of impending travel and trade restrictions, and then being required to stockpile products until normal services can resume; and others taking the risk to continue importing illicit drugs in a far more intense border security environment. This is leading to some significant drug busts of illegal product destined for the Australian market.

However, on the other hand, the pandemic is demonstrating that organised drug syndicates are particularly resourceful in the face of a pandemic, from camouflaging drugs in shipments of medical and PPE equipment destined to Australia; to modifying advertising methods from human contact to utilising the darknet; and modifying delivery systems to make use of home deliveries, taxis, Ubers and even drones; to provide drug deals to users.

COVID19 provides an opportunity, just as much as a crisis, from the perspective of the illicit drug trade. Not only are the organised crime syndicates and networks that produce, traffic and distribute drugs able to weather the storm of the pandemic, but in many cases illicit drug markets are strengthening as a result of COVID-19 adjustments.

### **Scammers & Fraudsters**

With Australians staying at home as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, we are seeing an increase in blackmarket sales of counterfeit medicine and Personal Protective equipment utilising the darknet.

The ACCC has received over 3,600 (coronavirus) scam reports with over \$2.4 million dollars in reported losses since the outbreak of COVID-19. Common scams include phishing for personal information; phishing for financial information; online shopping scams; superannuation scams; government impersonation scams; charity impersonation scams; and scams targeting businesses.

### **Criminal Justice System**

On the other side of the equation, COVID-19 is affecting the capacity of law enforcement agencies to respond to the normal crime types, community policing and investigations into organised crime and for the court system to deal with offenders.

Police across Australia are consumed with dealing with public order issues, state border controls, quarantine measures, pandemic outbreaks, and enforcing COVID-19 restrictions. Additionally, police stations, police headquarters and offices have implemented safe distancing measures, staffing number restrictions, and recalibration of operational priorities to meet COVID-19 challenges.

Another key pillar of criminal justice, the judicial system, is also being

disrupted, with a number of States and Territories shutting down courts during the pandemic or having limited number of hearings being held, causing a significant backlog of matters.

### **Necessity is the mother of Invention**

COVID-19 and the financial impact on Australian governments, is an opportunity for Australian policing, law enforcement and national security to remove duplication of effort, refine operational priorities and consolidate where appropriate. Although this will be largely driven by financial budgetary constraints it can also be of great benefit to the Australian community.

What we can learn from COVID-19 and the National Cabinet approach, is that like the pandemic, crime does not have borders or limitations, and this requires a national response in Australian policing, law enforcement and national security.

For example, although the ACIC model has and is a great Australian law enforcement success story in its current form, it may well need to be expanded or modified to best adapt to the post COVID-19 crime environment with consideration being given for 'criminal intelligence' agencies such as Austrac; the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) and Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC) being merged into it.

Or even more radical, will it be time to consider Organised Crime investigation, Fraud investigation, Cyber Crime investigation and Drug investigation currently conducted by Federal, States and Territory Police being within a national policing body with State and Territory police focusing purely on community policing and public order?

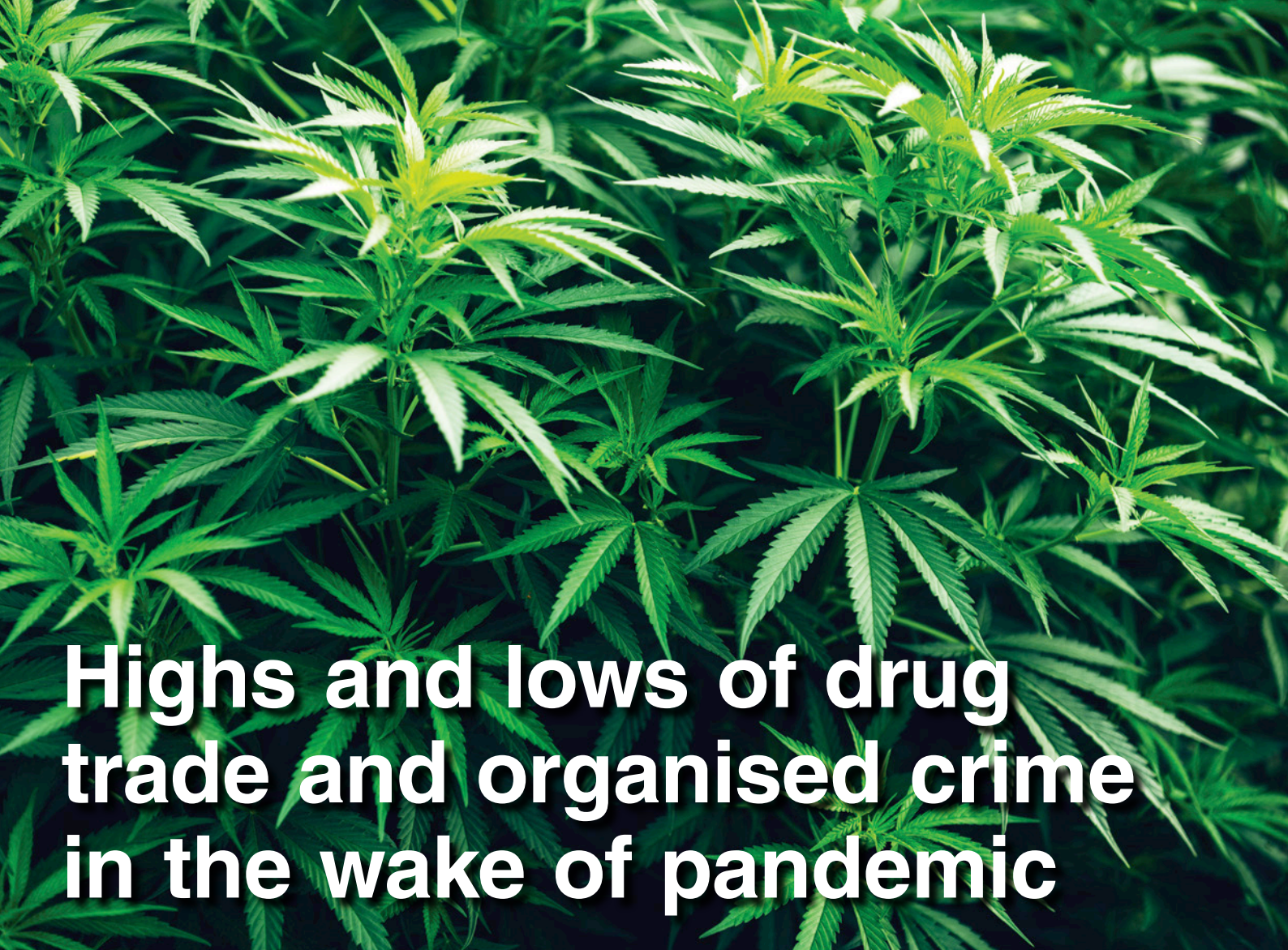
In the 1820s, Robert Peel – the father of our policing model – said:

*'The police are the public and the public are the police.'*

His words emphasise how the ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval and public respect.

In the COVID-19 environment and beyond, the objectives of policing must be to achieve public safety objectives and at the same time continue to counter organised crime negatively impacting on Australian society. To become ineffective in either area will lead to loss of public support, public approval and public respect.





# Highs and lows of drug trade and organised crime in the wake of pandemic

April 14, 2020 — 12.01am

**BY LUCY CORMACK**

This article appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*

From Sydney's dial-a-dealer drug operations, to large-scale methamphetamine labs in rural Mexico, crime around the world is feeling the pinch of coronavirus.

Sources say the importation of drugs and precursor chemicals in air cargo and international mail from China has virtually ground to a halt, while dealers on the dark web say, in some cases, they are struggling to meet demand.

The shutdown of entire countries has put the brakes on organised criminal activity, however the impact is likely to be short-lived, as illicit activities rapidly adapt to meet both old and new market demand.

The advice from the Global Initiative for Transnational Organised Crime (GITOC) reveals the immediate impact of worldwide restrictions on public movement is particularly being felt by frontline drug dealers.

One police officer said Sydney's street dealer market appears to have shifted in the wake of enforced policing of public movement and the threat of \$1000 fines for leaving the house without an "essential" reason.

"Drug dealers are delivering less and buyers appear to be picking up more under current COVID-19 restrictions, however there has not yet been data analysis of this."

Overseas, lengthy lockdowns of Chinese factories meant many international criminal enterprises have been left without alternative sources for supply, the GITOC report found.

For example, it found Mexican cartels producing methylamphetamines

and fentanyl were being "impaired by difficulties in procuring imports of the precursor chemicals from China".

Around one-third of the 10 tonnes of methylamphetamine consumed in Australia every year is believed to originate in Mexico.

The Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission's most recent Illicit Drug Data Report found, by weight, more than 70 per cent of both cocaine and MDMA consumed in Australia arrives by air cargo.

By number, international mail is by far the most common method of importation for cocaine (94.1 per cent), MDMA (98.9 per cent) and cannabis (83.9 per cent).



***The availability of drugs in Australia is astoundingly high ... for anyone who wants cannabis, cocaine, methylamphetamine. A huge majority of users say they have never found it easier***

While current importations of drugs and precursor chemicals are likely to have been impacted by short-term shutdowns to airline operations, it is not believed this will impact immediate drug supply in Australia.

"The availability of drugs in Australia is astoundingly high ... for anyone who wants cannabis, cocaine, methylamphetamine. A huge majority of users say they have never found it easier," said Dr James Martin, criminologist at Swinburne University.

He said while lockdowns had severely disrupted operations in China, illicit trade was expected to "snap back" once they are relaxed.

Similarly GITOC observed flow-on effects from the virus outbreak to violent crime linked to organised criminal activity.

Higher than usual murder rates in Mexico "dropped dramatically from the national average of 81 per day to 54 after social distancing measures were put in place". However the reduction was shortlived, with the rate quickly returning to normal levels, it said.

In Europe GITOC said social distancing policies were impacting the dynamics of local drug markets and could "prompt a shift to online and dark-web markets".

Dr Martin said Australian communications on dark-web forums suggested a spike in demand since the virus outbreak, in particular for cannabis.

"That is unsurprising. When there is a looming shutdown people think there might be an interruption to the supply chain. We saw it here in supermarkets with toilet paper, it makes sense illicit drug users would do the same."

He said while the dark web was the home of illicit goods and their traders, there was evidence of "community policing" against recent attempts by bad actors to sell fake cures for coronavirus.

"Administrators of [dark-web] sites have put bans on people for this, actually doing due diligence to protect people from 'snake oil salesmen'," he said.

In March the INTERPOL-coordinated Operation Pangea arrested 121 people and seized potentially dangerous pharmaceuticals worth more than \$22 million (\$US14 million).

Ninety countries were involved in the coordinated operation targeting the illicit online sale of medicines and medical products.

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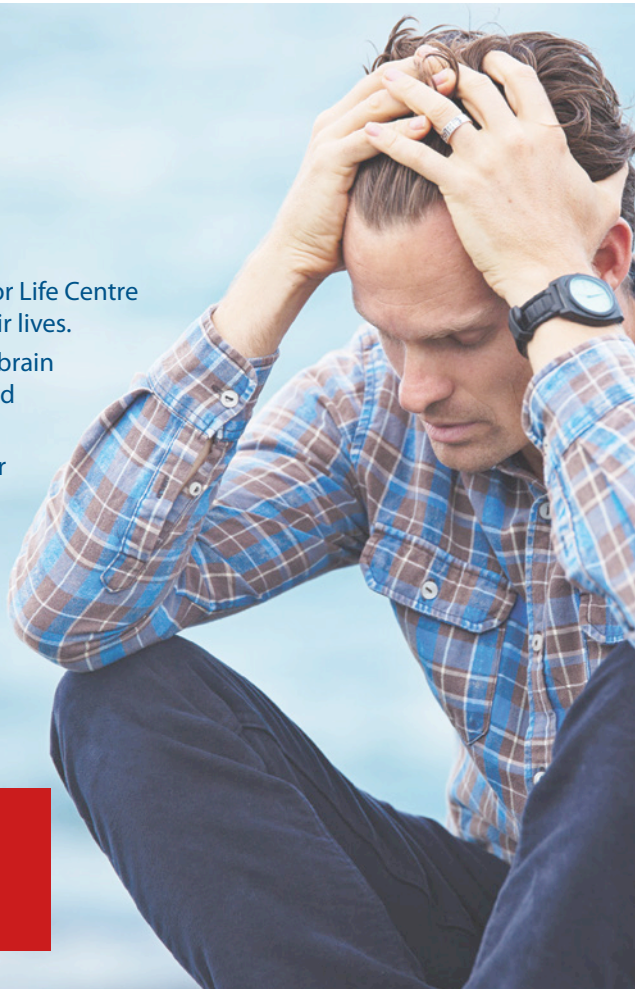
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# Availability of COVID-19 related products on Tor darknet markets

RODERIC BROADHURST, MATTHEW BALL AND  
CHUXUAN JESSIE JIANG

## Abstract

Twenty Tor darknet markets were surveyed on 3 April 2020 to conduct a census of COVID-19 related medical products and supplies. There were 645 listings, including 222 unique listings, of COVID-19 related products across 12 markets. Three markets accounted for 85 percent of all unique listings identified. Of the 110 vendors identified, eight were active in multiple markets. A small proportion of vendors accounted for most listings. The estimated value of all unique listings was A\$369,000. Personal protective equipment accounted for nearly half of all unique listings, and one third of products were antiviral or repurposed medicines. Supposed vaccines, tests and diagnostic instruments each accounted for nearly 10 percent of listings.

## Introduction

Since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern (WHO 2020), attention has focused on the capacity of health systems to respond. Significant concerns have been raised about the availability of vital medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE; Woodley 2020). As the pandemic sparks significant demand, shortages are being reported worldwide (Jacobs, Richtel & Baker 2020) and profit-motivated criminal groups and entities are seizing the opportunity to exploit gaps in the healthcare sector (Europol 2020; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2020).

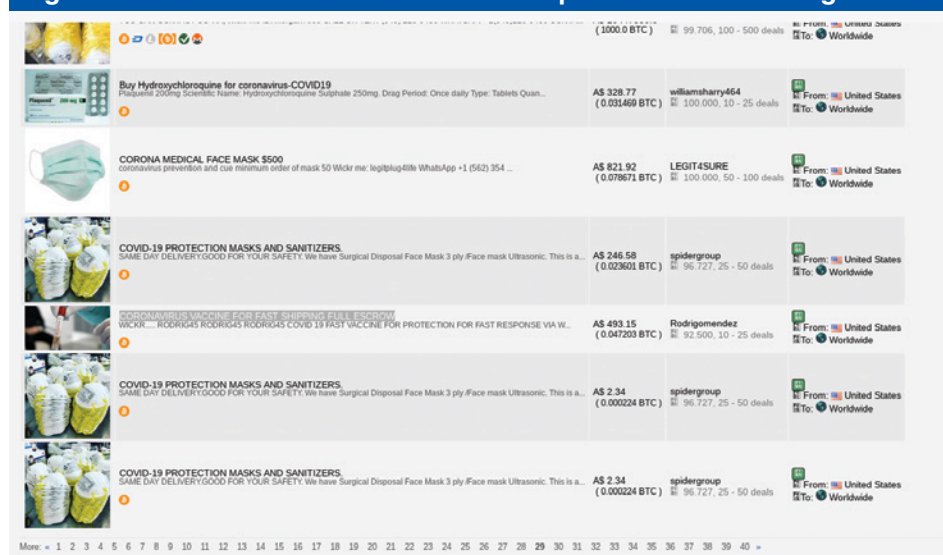
Tor darknet markets are frequently used as a litmus test of illicit drug and malware trends, as well as criminal novelty and entrepreneurship more generally. Surveys of darknet markets help track prices of narcotics and other

drugs as well as surges or shortages in certain drugs or contraband. Crime follows opportunity and the COVID-19 pandemic offers profiteering arising from shortages and fear.

The Australian Institute of Criminology's Serious and Organised Crime Research Laboratory commissioned the Australian National University's Cybercrime Observatory to scan active darknet cryptomarkets on Tor for COVID-19 related products. A scan of 20 darknet markets was undertaken on 3 April 2020 (and verified on 6 April) to identify the scale and scope of 'underground' online sales of COVID-19 related products. Identified products included vaccines, antiviral or repurposed medicines for COVID-19 treatment, diagnostic tests and PPE such as surgical or N95 masks (see Figure 1).

The available products were most likely diverted or stolen from factories, stores and warehouses or laboratories producing PPE or pharmaceuticals.

Figure 1: Screenshot of COVID-19 related products listed on Agartha





## Method

The Tor darknet market environment is highly volatile and prone to disruption. We sought to capture the relevant data by selecting and searching available darknet markets in a single day. Crawlers designed for Tor sites were used to search known markets for the COVID-19 related products of interest. For further details of the search methods, see Ball et al. 2019.

Altogether, 20 omnibus darknet markets were identified as active on Friday 3 April 2020 and surveyed for COVID-19 related products. This represented a substantial, if unknown, proportion of active omnibus darknet markets in the Tor hidden service ecosystem. Niche markets were excluded. The authenticity of the markets included in this snapshot could not be fully ascertained. Many are prone to vendor swindles and market exit scams. Only 16 markets are listed and 'vetted' as genuine on the well-known Tor information clearing house Darknetlive (see <https://darknetlive.com/markets/>) but only nine out of the 20 markets included here met Darknetlive's criteria. At the time of survey, 12 of the 20 markets (60%) returned at least one COVID-19 related product listing. These 12 darknet markets are listed below, with an asterisk (\*) indicating markets 'approved' by Darknetlive:

- Agartha
- Apollon (Another Tor clearing house, 'The Hub', stated that Apollon closed in an exit scam on 28 January 2020. Given the absence of product movement, this is likely. Only azithromycin was detected on Apollon.)
- Avior
- Cypher\*
- DarkBay\*
- DarkMarket\*
- Dream Alt
- Empire\*
- Square\*
- Versus\*
- White House\*
- Yellow Brick\*

The other eight markets (AlphaOmega, ASEAN, BlackRy, DarkFox, Europa, Monopoly\*, Pax Romana and Venus Anonymous) returned no results for COVID-19 related product listings. Automated crawlers were not used to collect data from seven of these eight markets because they did not meet our threshold minimum of at least 1,000 listings per market. However, they were manually surveyed for this census or snapshot.

**Table 1: Summary of COVID-19 related products available on 12 Tor darknet markets**

Products	All listings n (%)	Unique listings n (%)	Median price (A\$)	Mean price (A\$) <sup>a</sup>
<b>PPE</b>	<b>224 (34.7)</b>	<b>99 (44.6)</b>		
Surgical masks/sanitiser/gloves	118 (18.3)	50 (22.5)	100	780b
N95/N99 masks	77 (11.9)	27 (12.2)	400	1,391
Protective suits/full PPE	7 (1.1)	6 (2.7)	1,158	4,939
Bulk masks/sanitiser/gowns	22 (3.4)	16 (7.2)	1,551	3,116
<b>Tests/diagnostics</b>	<b>59 (9.2)</b>	<b>19 (8.5)</b>		
Quick/rapid/virus tests	28 (4.3)	12 (5.4)	313	937
Thermo-scanners/industrial	31 (4.8)	7 (3.1)	5,738	6,689
<b>Vaccines/antidotes</b>	<b>41 (6.4)</b>	<b>22 (9.9)</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>5,393</b>
<b>Antiviral/repurposed medicines</b>	<b>313 (48.5)</b>	<b>74 (33.3)</b>		
Hydroxychloroquine	105 (16.3)	11 (5.00)	200	383
Chloroquine	125 (19.4)	35 (15.8)	308	549
Favipiravir	4 (0.6)	4 (1.8)	563	494
Azithromycin	79 (12.3)	24 (10.8)	43	103
<b>Ventilators</b>	<b>1 (0.2)</b>	<b>1 (0.5)</b>	<b>2,000</b>	<b>2,000</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>7 (1.1)</b>	<b>7 (3.2)</b>		
COVID19 Handbook	5 (0.8)	5 (2.3)	15	14
3D printed masks app	2 (0.3)	2 (10.00)	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>645 (100)</b>	<b>222 (100)</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>49,165</b>

a: Prices are estimated for unique listings b: An extreme outlier excluded  
Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

We searched each market for terms such as 'COVID-19', 'coronavirus', 'virus', and 'pandemic', and then inspected the listings identified. We then excluded listings where these terms were used as promotional devices for other products, notably drugs—for example: 'Special—COVID-19 offer on MDMA', 'Coronavirus special price' and 'Free masks with every delivery of Oxy'. We noted that some malware and ransomware vendors promoted COVID-19 related social engineering scripts and these were also excluded from analysis. We also searched for specific terms relating to antiviral and other medicines (eg favipiravir, azithromycin and chloroquine, as well as their proprietary brand names) and PPE (eg N95). Three days after the first survey, market listings were verified and a decline in listings on Agartha was observed. The listing title, price, vendor, market, shipping from location, and shipping to location were recorded for each listing identified.

We also reviewed six popular darknet forums or information centres for qualitative sources of information about the response of darknet markets and consumers to the pandemic. These information hubs were two 'clearnet' forums (dark.fail and Darknetlive) and four hidden Tor services (Dread, The Hub Forum, Envoy Forum and DNM Avengers Forum).

The total number of listings includes all products that were located on the 12 markets, including duplicated listings posted by the same vendor under different sub-categories (ie in drugs, services and drug paraphernalia) or in different markets. The number of unique listings excludes those product listings repeated within or across markets. We undertook no purchases and the veracity of products on offer could not be verified. Information on purchases was not available. Darknet markets are prone to scams and fake or substitute product deliveries are commonplace. COVID-19 related products are unlikely to be exempt.

*continued on page 10*



*continued from page 9*

## Results

Table 1 summarises the types of products available and their approximate prices. A total of 645 COVID-19 related products were found, one-third of which ( $n=222$ ) were unique listings identified after the removal of listings repeated across markets.

These COVID-19 related products made up less than one percent of all products available, which included thousands of listings across all markets for various drugs, services and digital products. There are fewer COVID-19 related products on darknet markets than products such as fentanyl (Ball, Broadhurst & Trivedi 2020) or firearms and other weapons (Broadhurst et al. forthcoming). Agartha listed 444 COVID-19 related products (0.3% of its 159,463 listings) while DarkBay's 118 COVID-19 related listings represent only 0.2 percent of its total of 63,596 listings.

## COVID-19 related products and prices Personal protective equipment

Personal protective equipment such as masks, sanitisers, gowns and gloves accounted for about half of all unique listings ( $n=99$ , 45%) and over a third of all listings ( $n=224$ , 35%). Prices and quantities varied significantly. For example, a vendor on DarkBay sold a 'Factory Supply Anti Virus Cotton Reusable N95 1860 Face Mask for Corona Virus' for US\$1 but did not specify quantities. Another vendor on Agartha offered 'CORONA MEDICAL FACE MASK \$500' but did not mention the number of masks.

Seven percent of unique listings of PPE products ( $n=16$ ) offered bulk purchases and two (1%) offered computer applications for the 3D printing of masks. Examples of bulk offers include an Agartha vendor who sold '10,000 GOOD QUALITY LAB TESTED FACE MASK FOR CORONA' valued at A\$17,952, and another vendor on Yellow Brick who offered 'BULK anti corona virus mask ON SALES FAST DELIVERY' for A\$5,000.

## Antiviral and repurposed medicines

After PPE, antiviral and repurposed medicines were the next most common products, accounting for a third of the unique listings ( $n=74$ , 33%) and almost half of all listings ( $n=313$ , 49%). Antimalarial drugs, the antibiotic azithromycin and the antiviral medicine favipiravir have been featured in media reports about likely treatments for COVID-19.

While antimalarial treatments (eg chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine) are usually cheap and readily available, they were present at inflated prices in notable quantities in over a third ( $n=230$ , 36%) of all listings and nearly three-quarters of all medicinal listings. A vendor on White House who shipped worldwide offered 'Hydroxychloroquine Hcqs 400mg 100 Pills \$139 Miracle Drug For Coronavirus' and 100 200-milligram pills for \$US90.

The antibiotic azithromycin was also listed 79 times (12% of all listings) and accounted for 11 percent of unique listings ( $n=24$ ). An Agartha





***Despite the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, or any other coronavirus, purported vaccines and antidotes made up about six percent of all listings and 10 percent of unique listings.***

purported vaccines and antidotes made up about six percent of all listings ( $n=41$ ) and 10 percent of unique listings ( $n=22$ ). The following listing titles are typical of those touting vaccines and cures: 'GET CORONA VIRUS VACCINE OVERNIGHT DELIVERY'; 'HELLO buy fast... CORONA-VIRUS VACCINE is out now'; 'COVID-19 ANTIDOTE IS HERE FROM CHINA'; 'COVID-19 CURE VACCINE. Keep quiet on this'; 'COVID-19 ANTIDOTE VACCINS FOR SALE'; 'BY CORONAVIRUS CURE WE ORDER WORLD WIDE VERY UNDERSTANDABLE PRIZES'; and 'CORONAVIRUS VACCINE FOR FAST SHIPPING FULL ESCROW'.

Details about the origin or composition of vaccines were sparse, but they are likely fraudulent. There may also be experimental vaccines illegally diverted from research laboratories conducting animal or human trials, or even sourced from patients who have recovered from COVID-19.

The median cost of a vaccine was A\$575, but vaccines offered by three vendors on DarkBay allegedly sourced from China were priced at US\$10,000 to US\$15,000. The most costly vaccine was 'COVID-19 Antidote for sale' at A\$24,598 on Dream Alt, shipped worldwide from the United States. Vaccines were available only from Agartha, DarkBay and Dream Alt. Four Agartha vendors offered free worldwide shipping of vaccines ranging in price from A\$657 to A\$739 ('GET THAT VACCINE FOR THE MOST VIRAL CORONA VIRUS'), and one included escrow at \$493 ('CORONAVIRUS VACCINE FOR FAST SHIPPING FULL ESCROW').

#### Tests

COVID-19 test kits (eg 'New rapid test kit to detect COVID-19') were also listed 28 times, but comprised only eight and a half percent of unique listings ( $n=19$ ). A DarkMarket vendor

shipping worldwide from Europe sold a 'COVID-19 Antibody Test Kit' for A\$71. A few listings offered test kits in bulk, such as an Agartha vendor who sold 500 'Corona Virus Test/COVID-19 Test Kits (500Pcs)' for A\$3,287. Industrial scanning thermometers were also available in 31 listings (5% of all listings;  $n=7$ ; 3% of unique listings) including those titled: 'BUY CAMERA SCANNER FOR CORONAVIRUS DETECTION'; 'INFRARED THERMOMETERS, 3PLY MASKS, SURGICAL MASKS'; and 'free shipment COVID19 thermometer scanner'. One Agartha vendor, shipping worldwide from the United States, claimed to be a bulk supplier of 2,000 'Industrial Thermometers COVID-19 (2000Prd/\$4)', on sale for A\$52 each, but another offered all 2,000 'Industrial Thermometers' for A\$13,150. Another Agartha vendor, shipping worldwide from Hong Kong, offered 'BUY CAMERA SCANNER FOR CORONAVIRUS DETECTION' for A\$1,357.

#### Other

Other COVID-19 related products identified included a single ventilator, priced at \$2,000, and five listings of a book titled '*Corona Virus Covid19 Epidemic Survival Handbook Medical Physical Social Economic and Financial Guide*'. This handbook was the only product related to COVID-19 sold on Cypher.

#### Markets

Among markets, Agartha ( $n=444$ ) offered over two-thirds (69%) of all available COVID-19 products, followed by DarkBay (18%,  $n=118$ ) and Empire (7%,  $n=48$ ). Each of the other nine markets offered five or fewer products and accounted for the remaining five percent of all product listings. One market, Cypher, offered only

*continued on page 12*

vendor shipping from the United States advertised 'Order Azithromycin for Coronavirus - COVID-19' for A\$329.

Four listings of the antiviral medicine favipiravir (also known as T-705 and sold under the brand name Avigan) were identified (2% of unique listings, <1% of all listings). For example, a vendor on Empire offered 'Favipiravir Pills 10 Pills Per Bottle COVID19 CURE' for A\$165 (shipping details not provided), but another vendor shipping from Italy offered 'High Quality Best Price Favipiravir (CAS 259793-9)' for A\$452. A vendor on Agartha who shipped worldwide from Belgium offered a combination of 'Favipiravir, Chloroquine, Lopinavir and Ritonavir' from A\$674. Observed once, lopinavir and ritonavir are HIV/AIDS treatments noted as potentially useful for treating COVID-19.

#### Vaccines, antidotes and cures

Despite the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, or any other coronavirus,

a single listing: the 'Corona Virus Covid19 Epidemic Survival Handbook'. Agartha's market share is much lower when unique listings are considered: Agartha comprised about a third (35%) of unique listings, followed by DarkBay (31%), Empire (19%) and other markets (16%).

Purported vaccines were available on Agartha, DarkBay and Dream Alt, and diagnostic tests and antiviral medicines could also be found on Empire and DarkMarket. These markets were the dominant sources of most products. PPE was sold on four markets, with Agartha selling 50 percent of supply, DarkBay 28 percent, Empire 16 percent and Square six percent.

Agartha was the dominant market in terms of capitalisation, making up 74 percent of the A\$879,000 estimated value, taking into account all listings. However, this value is reduced to A\$369,000 and Agartha's market share to 51 percent if only unique products are valued. Agartha has a reputation for scam risk among some forums but has grown since mid-2019 to over 150,000 listings. We observed a substantial decline in COVID-19 related products on Agartha by 6 April, three days after the 3 April census, indicating sales and/or removal. All other markets remained as observed on census.

## Vendors

We identified 110 unique vendor handles. (A Jaro–Winkler Score  $\geq 0.90$  was used to merge three identical vendors.) Eight vendors were active in at least two markets, including one active across four markets and another across three markets.

Based on all listings, most vendors claimed they were shipping from the United States ( $n=394$ , 61%), or Europe ( $n=56$ , 9% including the UK), although over a quarter did not indicate their location ( $n=182$ , 28%). Some vendors indicated where they shipped products to. Two-thirds of listings ( $n=430$ , 67%) promised to ship worldwide, while nearly a third shipped only to the United States ( $n=187$ , 29%).

The remainder ( $n=24$ , 4%) shipped within Europe or the United Kingdom. Four (1%) specifically mentioned shipping to Australia.

Three listings claimed to be shipped from Australia or China/Hong Kong (see Table 2). A vendor on Agartha shipped

**Table 2: Vendor shipping locations (based on all listings)**

Shipping from	<i>n</i>	%
United States	394	61.1
European Uniona	39	6.0
United Kingdom	17	2.6
Australia	3	0.5
China/Hong Kong	3	0.5
India	2	0.3
Worldwide	2	0.3
Turkey	1	0.2
Canada	1	0.2
New Zealand	1	0.2
Unknown/not stated	182	28.2
<b>All</b>	<b>645</b>	<b>100.0</b>

a: Sweden (10), Spain (8), Germany (7), Austria (4) Cyprus (1), Italy (2), Belgium (2), France (2), Denmark (2) and Finland (1) Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding

## Figure 2: Darknet community posts

### April 3

#### Coronavirus: Domestic updates - AusPost

With significant measures being taken across the country to combat the spread of COVID-19, our priority at Australia Post is to protect our people, customers and community.

### April 1

#### Orders delayed until further notice - dutchkingz (Vendor)

We had some trouble shipping out orders placed between 28 March and April 1st. orders placed on and before 28 March 2020 have all been shipped out

### March 31

#### Clarity about Corona II Small Update regarding no full lockdown in NL - DutchDrugz (Vendor)

So far shipments are arriving, also in lockdown countries, but delays can be insane. Destinations which usually arrive within 5 to 10 days, can now take over 4 to 6 weeks, no joke.

### March 26

#### DCdutchconnectionUK (DCUKConnection) COVID-19 UPDATE (Vendor)

Over the next few weeks we really don't know if we can stay online and ship products, this would depend on the lockdown and if the postal service carries on running.

a 'New rapid test kit to detect COVID-19' to and from Australia for A\$1,643 and also shipped 'Protection from novel coronavirus Disposable medic' worldwide from China, priced at \$8,219. Another vendor claimed to ship worldwide from Australia, offering 'Corona Anti Virus Face Mask Ready and, gowns' priced at A\$57.

A relatively small proportion of vendors accounted for most of the listings and potential profit. Among the most active was 'DrugLord22', a vendor with 23 listings on Agartha, including 'industrial thermometers' in bulk, with an estimated total value of A\$302,467. A vendor known as 'Safetrade' sold bulk N95 masks (16 listings worth A\$8,350)

and 'kinghacks' sold vaccines and was active on DarkBay and Dream Alt, with eight listings with an estimated total value of A\$99,598.

## Darknet forums and information centres

Posts on darknet forums and information centres about how vendors should approach the COVID-19 pandemic are highly visible. Some provide guidance for vendors. For example, dark.fail (<https://dark.fail/>) instructs:

**Respect lockdowns.** Self-quarantine if you are feeling symptoms. Wash your hands regularly, disinfect packages when interacting with mail.



The same forum tells consumers to read Yale's *Guidance for people who use substances on COVID-19 (Novel coronavirus)*, which educates about harm reduction.

The Darknetlive forum's 'Corona Timeline' (<https://darknetlive.com/corona>) provides information about disruptions to international postal services. Figure 2 presents examples of typical posts about these delays, as posted or reposted by forum members.

Discussions about COVID-19 on the darknet from mid-February have mirrored those on the clearnet, with the same surges as found in Google searches (Guirakhoo 2020a). In darknet forum discussions about criminal opportunities in a pandemic, a Digital Shadows analyst also observed (Guirakhoo 2020a):  
...some atypical discussions from users including:

- Discouraging other users from profiting off the pandemic
- Expressing solidarity with countries affected (particularly Italy)
- Providing health and safety information

Nevertheless, COVID-19 related opportunities have been identified across the spectrum of cybercrime from malware, phishing, online sales of drugs and contraband, fraud, fakes and deception.

Darknet players are profiteering, and not only are we seeing 'coronavirus sales' but on the flip side 'ethical' market actors are threatening anyone trying to conduct scams. For example, a user with the handle Ganymedes posted on the Envoy forum: 'Anyone who runs coronavirus scams I will personally make it my mission to blow their doxx

wide open to the entire darknet and the entire LE [law enforcement].' In a recent post, the darknet market Monopoly banned COVID-19 related products for ethical reasons:

You do not, under any circumstances use COVID-19 as a marketing tool. No magical cures, no silly fucking mask selling, toilet paper selling. None of that bullshit. We have class here... (Haig 2020)

Monopoly also warned buyers:

You are about to ingest drugs from a stranger on the internet - under no circumstances should you trust any vendor that is using COVID-19 as a marketing tool to peddle tangible/ already questionable goods... (Haig 2020)

As yet, discussions related to purported cures or vaccines for COVID-19 have not been found, but this could be due to the strict moderation on these forums. Discussions on 'The Hub' cover both harm reduction (especially misinformation) and opportunities for profit.

## Conclusion

The availability of COVID-19 related products on darknet markets is relatively insignificant compared to the availability of other contraband. However, the presence of fraudulent or untested vaccines and medicines warrants closer attention. Indeed, the underground sale of vaccines, real or not, is the key risk presented by darknet sales of COVID-19 products and raises two key concerns. First, fake vaccines could worsen the spread of the virus because users may behave as if immune but nevertheless

become infected. Second, the premature release of vaccines undergoing animal or human trials would also misguide users as to their immunity, but may also impact on the success of these crucial clinical trials.

## Acknowledgements

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General editor, *Statistical Bulletin series*: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology. For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Statistical Bulletin series*, visit the AIC website at: [aic.gov.au](http://aic.gov.au)

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Parents have been advised to monitor their children's online activity in light of an increase in dark web child abuse.

# Coronavirus: shock at rise in online predators

9:19AM APRIL 27, 2020

**SIMON BENSON**

National Affairs Editor

Online child sex abuse has more than doubled since the coronavirus outbreak, prompting the government to launch a national campaign warning parents to strictly monitor child activities at home during school closures.

The disturbing rise in child grooming and exploitation on the web since February comes amid the emergence of COVID-19-themed child abuse forums — some with more than 1000 members — sharing videos and images between pedophiles.

The move to raise the alarm for families follows one of the largest police operations into web-based child sex abuse that took two years and netted 16 Australians, who were charged with 738 offences, earlier this year. According

to the Australian Federal Police, another 23 people have been charged with 140 web-based child abuse offences since March 9.

The Australian understands that the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation's triage unit had been inundated over the past month with reports from the community about children being targeted online by pedophiles seeking to make contact.

The grooming attempts occurred across a range of platforms including social networking, video and image sharing, gaming and instant messaging apps.

The AFP data shows the amount of child abuse material shared on the darknet between February and March had doubled from this time last year.

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton will launch a national campaign on

*continued on page 17*

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*continued from page 15*

Monday to inform parents and carers to be especially vigilant in monitoring their children's online activity while the states continue with school closures, resulting in many young people spending up to five hours a day on the internet.

The ACCCE is also understood to have uncovered child abuse forums established as a result of COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions that have driven more users onto the darknet.

The AFP said COVID-19 messaging was being used in the title of child-sex abuse forums, with the ACCCE identifying an increase in users who were saying they were new to the darknet and were seeking advice and guidance on how to post child exploitation images and videos within hidden services.

There was an increase in the number of users claiming they were posting child abuse material within the darknet for the first time.

"The COVID-19 pandemic and the holiday period present online safety challenges for children and young people, such as online grooming, unwanted contact and image-based abuse, as they spend more time online with the possibility of limited adult supervision," Mr Dutton said.

"Children are potentially at further risk due to their isolation from schools, friends

***Children are potentially at further risk due to their isolation from schools, friends and community members who would otherwise be able to assist in mandatory reporting.***

and community members who would otherwise be able to assist in mandatory reporting.

"My message to online child sex offenders is simple: we are watching, and if you offend against children physically or by engaging them online, we will find and charge you to the full force of the law".

"The government is doing everything within its power to prevent online child sexual exploitation, but it's not enough

— we need parents and carers to play a lead role in protecting children."

The campaign will be spearheaded by the ACCCE and the ThinkUKnow program, with a resource pack alerting parents to tasks over seven days to ensure the safety of children online, including reviewing privacy settings, researching the apps and games children use and creating an online family safety contract.

The Australian last week reported that a global child exploitation sting triggered by a US Department of Homeland Security investigation had rescued four Australian children as young as two months old who were used to produce and exchange child rape videos and images through online pedophile networks. It led to the arrest by the AFP of the 16 charged with 738 child exploitation and sexual abuse offences.

AFP Commissioner Reece Kershaw had warned of a spike in traffic across the so-called dark web — including live-streaming and incidents of child sexual abuse and child grooming — since the outbreak of the coronavirus.

"This type of offending has no borders," Mr Kershaw said last week.

"It is very hard to explain to a society, to people who don't see the images ... these involve images like you've never seen before."

# COVID-19 pandemic and crime trends in NSW

MIN-TAEC KIM AND FELIX LEUNG

## AIM

To examine changes in crime in New South Wales, Australia, in the six-week period (15 March–26 April, 2020) following the implementation of social distancing strategies to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

## METHOD

We examine trends in violent, property, drug and justice-related criminal incidents recorded by the NSW Police Force from the week ending 15 March 2020 to the week ending 26 April 2020. Observed crime volumes are compared with a seasonally adjusted forecast model estimated from the previous five years of data.

## RESULTS

When assessed against the best performing forecast model for each category of crime, we find that, in April 2020:

- Non-domestic violence related assaults were 39 per cent lower than expected. Domestic violence related assaults were consistent with expectations.
- Sexual offences were 32 per cent lower and robberies 42 per cent lower than expected.
- Various property offences were lower than expected including: residential break-ins (down 29 per cent), non-residential break-ins (down 25 per cent), vehicle theft (down 24 per cent), stealing from a vehicle (down 34 per cent) and retail theft (down 55 per cent).
- Drug possession and dealing incidents remained stable in aggregate. But cocaine possession incidents were 40 per cent lower than expected while amphetamine possession incidents were 30 per cent higher than expected.
- Breaches of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) and bail conditions remained stable, despite an 85 per cent increase in AVO compliance checks and a 13 per cent increase in bail compliance checks.

## CONCLUSION

The six-week period following the introduction of social distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with large falls in various violent and property crimes in NSW. However, offences sensitive to police enforcement activity, such as drug offences and breaches of AVOs and bail conditions, were mostly stable.

## INTRODUCTION

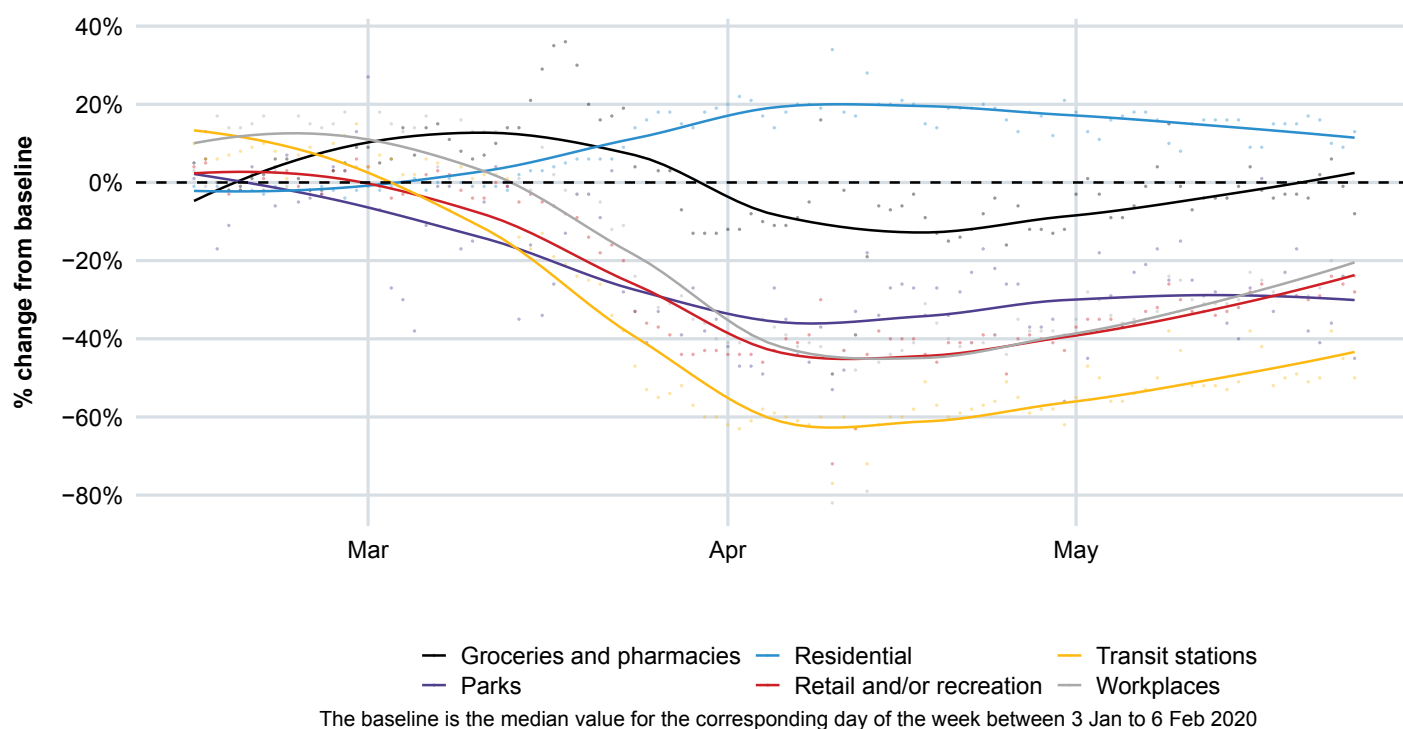
A global pandemic was declared on 11 March 2020 by the World Health Organization in response to the global spread of COVID-19. The spread of COVID-19 forced governments to initiate significant social restrictions aimed at containing its outbreak. In NSW, the first four COVID-19 cases were detected in late January 2020.<sup>1</sup> No new cases were detected in February 2020, but from 1 March 2020, new diagnoses began to rise sharply.

The Australian and NSW Governments' response to COVID-19 included minimising community transmission through the use of social distancing measures and enforced isolation. Social distancing advice, rules and restrictions were introduced and strengthened from mid-March 2020 through April 2020 with the intention of reducing person-to-person transmission by minimising contact between people. These include:

- On 15 March, NSW residents were advised to work from home if possible, avoid crowds and gatherings, reduce public transport use and keep 1.5 metres away from other people.<sup>2</sup>
- On 18 March, non-essential indoor gatherings were formally limited to 100 people and outdoor gatherings limited to 500 people.<sup>3</sup> Indoor gatherings needed to allow four square metres per person.
- On 23 March, non-essential NSW businesses and activities were closed including pubs, gyms, cinemas, restaurants, cafes and places of worship. Work from home messaging was reinforced.<sup>4</sup>
- Starting 24 March, public schools moved to an online curriculum with parents encouraged to keep children home from school.
- On 31 March, criminal offences were enacted under the NSW Public Health Act 2010 requiring that people not leave their place of residence without a reasonable excuse and limiting outdoor gatherings to two people.



**Figure 1. Trends in community mobility (Google location data)**



The most stringent restrictions were in place throughout April, with some restrictions relating to isolation being relaxed from 15 May 2020.

Community mobility changed dramatically in response to these government directions. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows Google location data<sup>5</sup> charting changes in time spent in various locations, such as, residences, workplaces, parks, transit stations and shops from mid-February to the end of May 2020 compared with a baseline period in early 2020.<sup>6</sup>

Time spent at home started to rise in the second half of March before stabilising for the month of April, at 19 per cent higher than baseline. By contrast, time spent in other locations began to fall in the second half of March and remained low throughout April. In April 2020, compared to baseline, time spent in work places fell by 40 per cent, transit stations fell by 60 per cent, parks fell by 35 per cent, grocery and pharmacy locations fell by 10 per cent and retail and recreation locations fell by 40 per cent.

Given the significant disruption to regular activities due to the COVID-19

response, it is relevant to consider the effect that these changes have had on crime. Emerging research from other jurisdictions suggest that some crime categories have fallen considerably during COVID-19 lockdowns (see, for instance, Payne & Morgan, 2020, for Queensland; Ashby, 2020, for various US locations; Campedelli, Aziani, & Favarin, 2020, for Los Angeles; Gerell, Kardell, & Kindgren, 2020, for Sweden).

This brief examines trends in crime in NSW since the COVID-19 containment measures were implemented and community mobility fell. We compare the level of crime observed in the six weeks to 26 April with the levels expected in that period based on historical trends.

## METHOD

This brief relies on weekly counts of incidents reported to, or detected by, the NSW Police Force from January 2015 to the week ending 26 April 2020. These data were extracted from the NSW Police Force's (NSWPF) Computerised Operational Policing System (COPS) on 9 May 2020. Crime data are generally

subject to revision overtime and BOCSAR's usual practice is to process crime data six weeks after the close of the period to ensure that the figures are relatively stable. For this brief, the processing has been brought forward by one month. As a result, April 2020 data are likely to be revised upward, by around two or three percent, at a later date. Data are represented based on the report date rather than the incident date, a factor which considerably reduces revision.

This brief focuses on the following crime categories:

- Violent crime:
  - assault – domestic and non-domestic violence related;
  - sexual offences; and
  - robbery.
- Property offences:
  - break and enter dwelling;
  - break and enter non-dwelling;
  - steal from motor vehicle;
  - steal from retail store; and
  - motor vehicle theft.

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1. The first case was detected in NSW on 24 January 2020, two more were detected on 25 January and a fourth on 30 January 2020. Source: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/find-facts-about-covid-19>

2. Advice issued 15 March 2020: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Factsheets/social-distancing.pdf>

3. Advice issued 18 March 2020: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/update-coronavirus-measures>

4. Advice issued 23 March 2020: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/media-releases/new-covid-19-restrictions-begin-as-schools-move-towards-online-learning>

5. Data are based on Google users who have opted-in to Location History for their Google Account. Data accessed from [google.com/covid19/mobility/](https://google.com/covid19/mobility/)

6. The baseline is the median value for the corresponding day of the week during the five-week period from 3 January to 6 February 2020.

- Drug offences:
  - possession and/or use of drugs—total, and amphetamines, cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy;
  - dealing/trafficking in drugs.
- Justice order offences:
  - breach Apprehended Violence Order; and
  - breach bail condition.

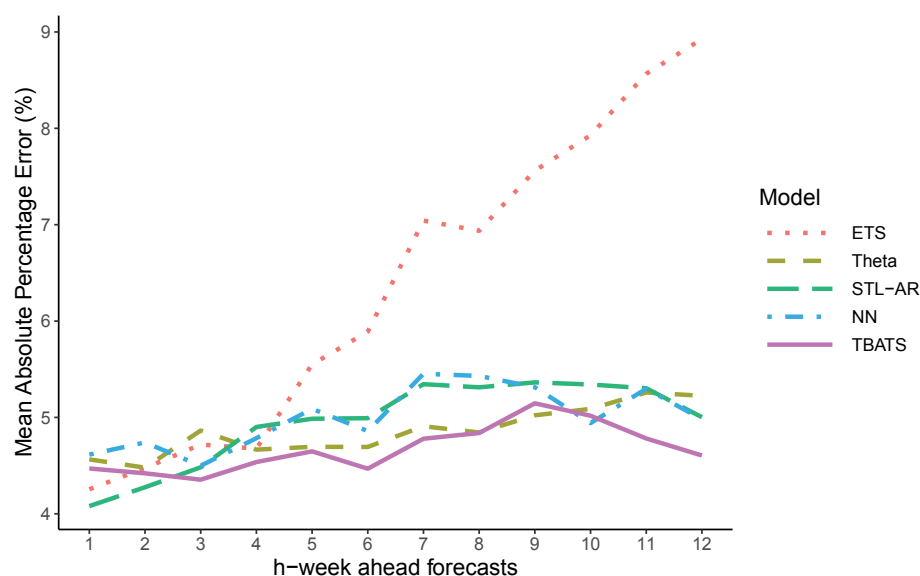
### Forecast model

To determine whether crime has changed since social distancing measures were introduced, it is necessary to estimate how much crime would be expected to occur in the absence of the pandemic. Forecasting techniques were used to predict crime from 15 March to 26 April 2020, based on historical observations. These forecasts included adjustment for seasonal fluctuations (as necessary) and accounted for pre-existing upward or downward trends. We then considered whether actual crime reported differed from what was expected.

The following section describes the process used to evaluate and select the optimal forecasting method for each offence time series examined in this brief.<sup>7</sup> For each offence time series, the following five forecasting methods were estimated:

1. **Exponential smoothing state space model (ETS).** In an ETS model, exponential smoothing is applied to the error, trend and seasonal components. This state space approach to forecasting is fully automated. The exact model specification and model parameters are selected based on the Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC), corrected for small sample bias (Hyndman, Koehler, Snyder, & Grose, 2002).
2. **ETS with Box-Cox transformation, ARMA errors, Trend and Seasonal components (TBATS).** The TBATS model is another automated forecasting method that can better accommodate complex seasonality (DeLivera, Hyndman, & Snyder, 2011).

Figure 2. MAPE over a 12-week horizon



3. **Autoregressive models on seasonally adjusted time series (STL-AR).** The time series is first decomposed into the seasonal and trend components using the STL method (Cleveland, Cleveland, McRae, & Terpenning, 1990).<sup>8</sup>

An auto regressive model, of which the order is chosen using the AIC, is then fitted to the de-seasonalised time series.

4. **Theta.** The theta method, proposed by Assimakopoulos and Nikolopoulos (2000), is one of the top performing methods in the M3 forecasting competition,<sup>9</sup> and therefore serves as a useful benchmark.
5. **Single-layer neural network (NN).** This is a feed-forward neural network model with a single hidden layer, with lagged values of the time series used as inputs (Hyndman et al., 2019).

The forecast accuracy of each method was evaluated based on cross-validated forecast errors, namely the Mean Absolute Percentage Error (MAPE). For each model, the 1-week, 2-week, 3-week etc up to 12-week ahead MAPEs were averaged over 36 test sets. The model with the smallest MAPE over the forecast horizon was then selected.

Figure 2 provides an example of the cross-validation results for assault offences. It can be seen that, in general,

the forecast errors become larger the further ahead the forecasts were made. For assault, the best model with the smallest MAPEs overall was the TBATS model, which, on average, has a MAPE of between four and five per cent over the forecast horizon. Thus, for this offence, the TBATS forecast was used to forecast the expected crime rate for comparison.

For all offence time series where data were available,<sup>10</sup> weekly data from 4 January 2015 to 15 March 2020 were used for model evaluation and selection. The best model for each series was then used to generate weekly forecasts to the end of May 2020.

### RESULTS

The following sections present the number of incidents observed per week, before and during the COVID-19 period (15 March to 26 April, 2020), together with the number of incidents that we would have expected to observe, based on trends prior to the COVID-19 period. Weekly recorded incident counts in 2019 are also shown for reference.

In addition, the change in the number of incidents observed were examined in the week ending 26 April versus the week ending 15 March (column 4 in each table), and comparisons are provided between the observed and expected number of incidents across the four weeks of April (column 7 in each table).

7. All models are estimated using the forecast package (Hyndman et al., 2019) in R, the software environment for statistical computing (R Core Team, 2020).

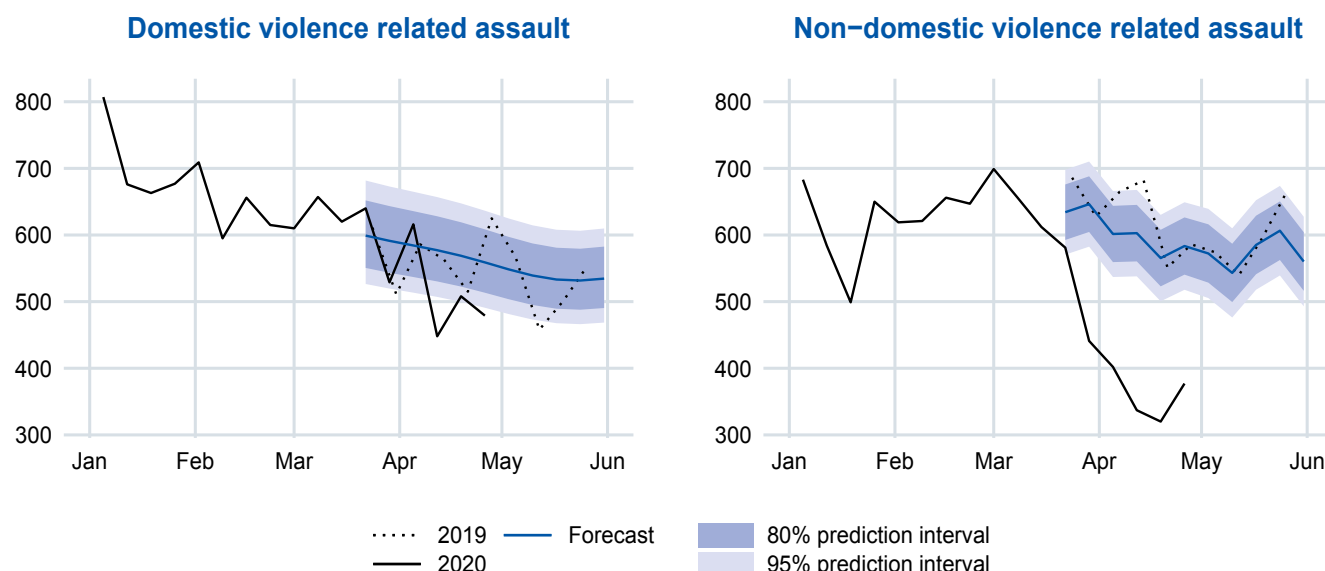
8. STL stands for "Seasonal and Trend decomposition using Loess".

9. The M3 forecasting competition is the third open forecasting competition organised by researcher Spyros Makridakis in 1998.

10. Where five years of data were not available, the TBATS method was used to generate the forecasts, as the cross-validation is less likely to be effective with less data. This is true for the number of compliance checks for bail and AVOs.



**Figure 3. Domestic and non-domestic violence related assaults per week in NSW**



**Table 1. Changes in the number of assault incidents, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Offence	Week ending 15 March	Week ending 26 April	% change v 15 March	April		% difference v forecast
	Incidents	Incidents		Average per week Incidents	Forecast	
Domestic violence related assault	620	479	-23%	513	572	-10%
Non-domestic violence related assault	612	377	-38%	359	588	-39%

The prediction intervals from the forecast model were used for each incident type to judge whether the changes observed are consistent (or inconsistent) with what could have been expected, based on existing trends.

## Violent offences

### Domestic violence related assault – consistent with forecast Non-domestic violence related assault – down 39 per cent

As Table 1 shows, in the six weeks between 15 March and 26 April, 2020, both domestic violence (DV) related assaults and non-DV related assaults declined, by 23 per cent (from 620 to 479 incidents) and 38 per cent (from 612 to 377 incidents), respectively.

Some seasonal decline over these six weeks would be expected as winter approaches. However, as shown in Figure

3, the reductions for non-DV related assault were larger than would be expected, based on the forecast model. The actual number of non-DV related assaults were well below the lower bound of the 95 per cent prediction interval. The observed number of DV related assaults, on the other hand, were largely consistent with the predictions from the forecast model.

### Sexual offences – down 32 per cent Robbery – down 42 per cent

The number of recorded sexual offences<sup>11</sup> are shown in Figure 4. It can be seen that sexual offences declined during the COVID-19 period under examination, from 324 in the week ending 15 March to 181 incidents in the week ending 26 April.

As for DV and non-DV related assault, the COVID-19 period coincides with a time of year where, historically, there are falls in recorded sexual offences.

For example, in 2019, over the same six-week period, recorded sexual offence incidents fell 39 per cent, from 354 to 220; this is comparable to the decrease observed in 2020.

Although, given historical data, a decline is expected during this period, the observed number of incidents during April 2020 were still lower than the decline predicted by the forecast model. As shown in Table 2, an average of 180 sexual offences incidents per week were observed in April 2020, which is 32 per cent lower than expected.<sup>12</sup>

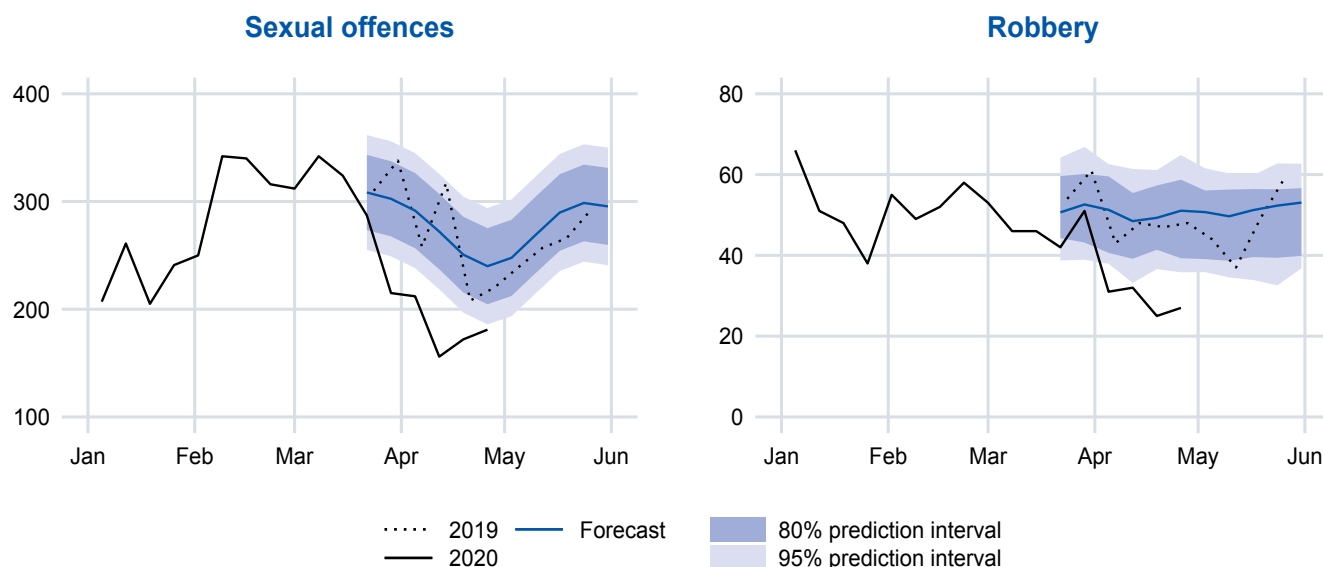
Table 2 shows that the number of robberies also dropped between the week ending 15 March and 26 April, 2020, falling from 46 to 27 incidents, or 41 per cent. This reduction in robberies is not consistent with the forecast model,

*continued on page 22*

11. Sexual offences include incidents of sexual assault, indecent assault, acts of indecency and a small number of other sexual offences.

12. Although the declines in these offences are outside the 95 per cent prediction interval for much of the COVID-19 period, one should be cautious in interpreting these results. These differences may reflect a failure of the model to account for the seasonality in the number of incidents rather than an unexpected decline in incidents.

**Figure 4. Sexual offences and robberies per week in NSW**



**Table 2. Changes in the number of incidents of sexual offences and robbery, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Offence	Week ending 15 March	Week ending 26 April	% change v 15 March	April		% difference v forecast
	Incidents	Incidents		Average per week Incidents	Forecast	
Sexual offences	324	181	-44%	180	264	-32%
Robbery	46	27	-41%	29	50	-42%

*continued from page 21*

as the observed number of incidents falls outside the 95 per cent prediction interval. Based on the forecast, during this period, the number of robberies was expected to remain relatively stable.

### Property offences

Figures 5, 6 and 7 show the number of property offences recorded by police in 2019 and 2020, together with the forecasted results for the COVID-19 period. Five offences were examined: break and enter, dwelling and non-dwelling; vehicle theft; steal from motor vehicle and steal from retail store. For each of the five offence types examined, the number of incidents during April 2020 was below the lower bound of the 95 per cent prediction interval.

### Break and enter dwelling – down 29 per cent Break and enter non-dwelling – down 25 per cent

Figure 5 shows a sharp decline in residential break-ins since the end of March 2020. As Table 3 shows, incidents of break and enter dwelling decreased 35 per cent,

from 468 incidents recorded in the week ending 15 March to 303 incidents recorded in the week ending 26 April. Non-residential break and enter incidents also declined over this six-week period, decreasing from 212 to 134 incidents, or 37 per cent.

The difference, in percentage terms, between the expected and observed incident counts during April 2020 is very similar for both residential and non-residential break and enter incidents. As Table 3 shows, there were 29 per cent fewer break and enter incidents in dwellings than were expected in April (approximately 132 fewer incidents per week) and 25 per cent fewer break and enter incidents in non-dwellings (approximately 49 fewer incidents per week).

### Steal from motor vehicle – down 34 per cent Motor vehicle theft – down 24 per cent

The number of motor vehicle theft incidents fell during the COVID-19 period under examination. As Table 4 shows, between 15 March and 26 April 2020, there was a 26 per cent reduction in recorded steal from motor vehicle

offences (from 662 to 489 incidents). Over the same period, there was also a reduction of 44 per cent in motor vehicle theft incidents (from 320 to 179 incidents).

Table 4 also shows, that comparing the number of incidents observed to the forecasted numbers for April, steal from motor vehicle theft offences were down by 34 per cent and motor vehicle theft offences were down by 24 per cent. The number of incidents for both types of motor vehicle offences were below the forecasted expectations, falling below the lower bound of the 95 per cent prediction interval.

### Steal from retail store – down 55 per cent

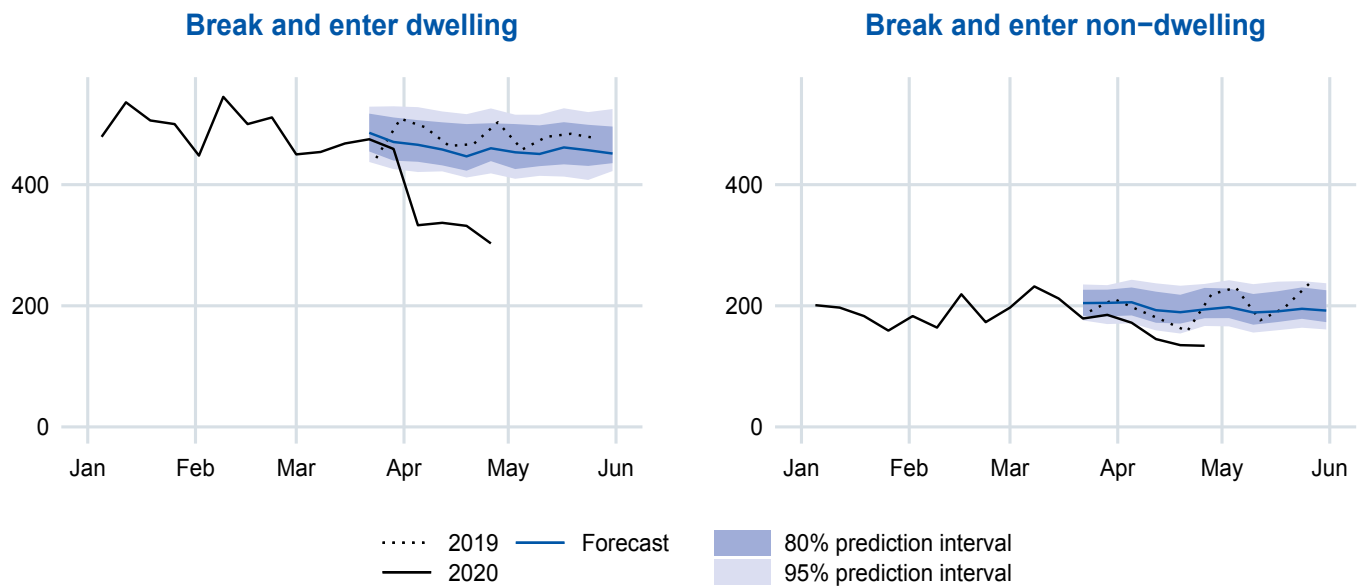
As Table 5 shows, the number of steal from retail store incidents fell by 42 per cent (from 462 to 266 incidents) between 15 March and 26 April 2020.

Comparing the number of incidents observed in April to the forecasted number, it is estimated that steal from retail store incidents decreased by 55 per cent. This drop is far greater than the forecast expectations.

*continued on page 25*



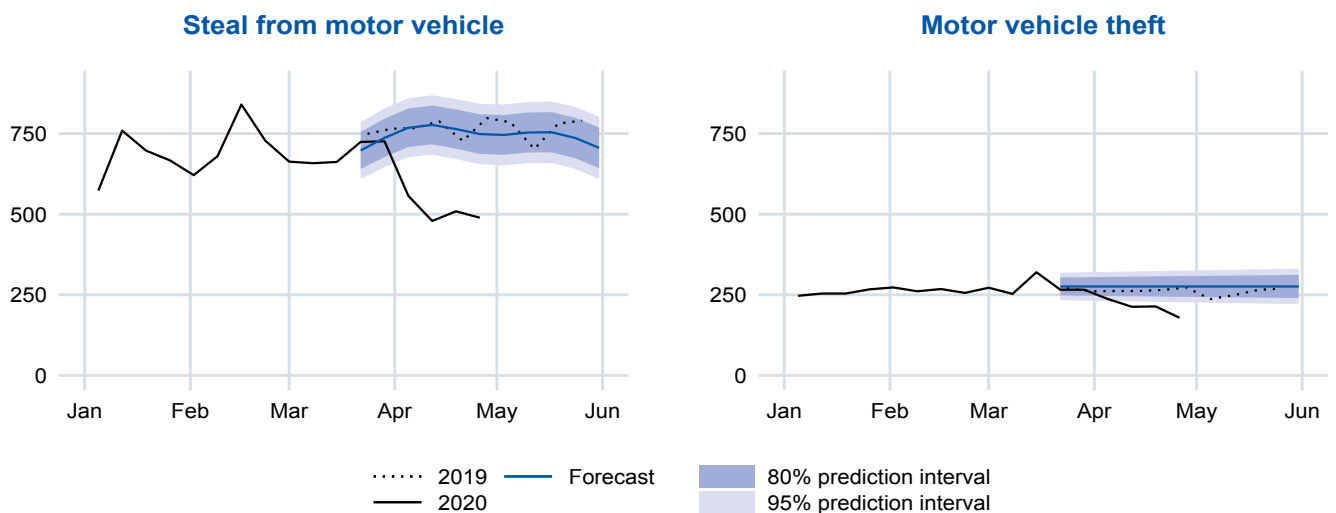
**Figure 5. Break and enter offences per week in NSW, by subcategory**



**Table 3. Changes in the number of incidents of break and enter offences, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Offence	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	April		% difference v forecast
				Average per week Incidents	Forecast	
Break and enter dwelling	468	303	-35%	326	458	-29%
Break and enter non-dwelling	212	134	-37%	146	195	-25%

**Figure 6. Motor vehicle offences per week in NSW, by subcategory**



**Table 4. Changes in the number of incidents of motor vehicle theft and steal from motor vehicle, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Offence	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	April		% difference v forecast
				Average per week Incidents	Forecast	
Steal from motor vehicle	662	489	-26%	508	764	34%
Motor vehicle theft	320	179	-44%	211	276	-24%



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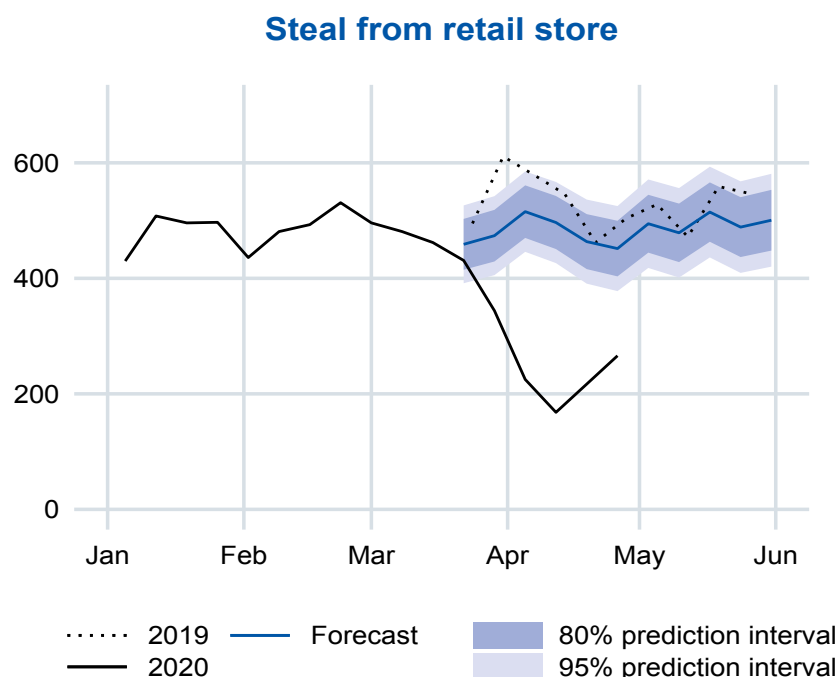
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**Figure 7. Steal from retail store incidents per week**



**Table 5. Changes in the number of incidents of steal from retail store, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

	Week ending 15 March	Week ending 26 April	April			
Offence	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	Average per week		% difference v forecast
				Incidents	Forecast	
Steal from retail store	462	266	-42%	219	482	-55%

*continued from page 22*

### Drug offences

Property and violent offences largely come to police attention through victims reporting these crimes. The next section considers the recorded incidence of a number of offences that are more sensitive to pro-active enforcement activity by police, namely, drug possession/use and drug dealing/trafficking.

### Drug possession and use – consistent with forecast

#### Drug dealing and trafficking – consistent with forecast

In contrast to the offences described in the previous sections, the total numbers of drug possession and dealing incidents recorded by police remained largely unchanged during the COVID-19 period under examination.

As reported in Table 6, there was a slight increase in incidents of drug

possession and/or use (from 654 to 768 incidents) and a drop in the number of drug dealing and trafficking incidents between 15 March and 26 April 2020 (from 165 to 70 incidents).

As shown in Figure 8, observed numbers of incidents of drug possession and/or use, and drug dealing and trafficking were very similar to the numbers forecast for this period. Compared to the forecast, drug dealing incidents in April 2020 were down by one per cent (90 versus 91 incidents per week), and drug possession incidents were up by four per cent (753 versus 726 incidents per week). However, these fluctuations are within the bounds of what would be expected based on the forecast models.

While the total volume of drug possession and/or use incidents is stable, there were some changes in the drug types coming to police attention. Figures 9 and 10 show trends in drug possession incidents by drug type.

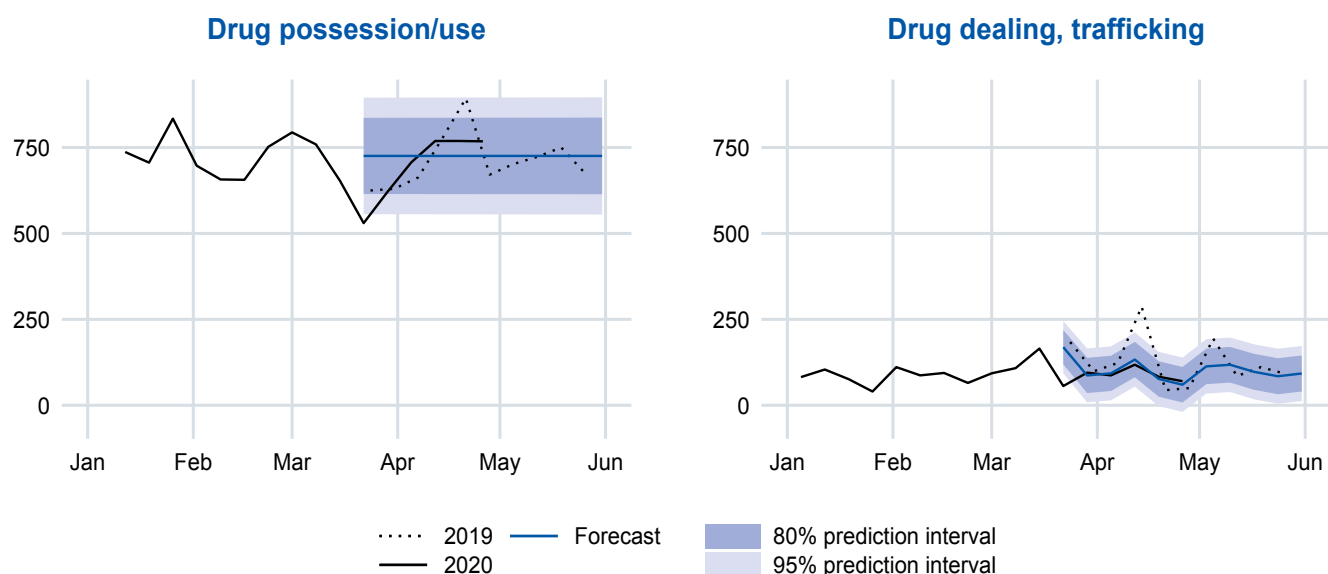
As Table 7 shows, incidents of amphetamine possession increased by 33 per cent, from 160 incident sin the week ending 15 March to 213 incidents in the week ending 26 April. The increase in amphetamine possession incidents exceeds the forecasted expectation for most of April. Over the same period, incidents of cannabis possession also increased from 304 incidents to 373 incidents, an increase of 23 per cent.<sup>13</sup> However, in the case of cannabis the increase is within the 80% prediction interval suggesting that the increase is in line with historical variation.

Conversely, the weekly number of incidents of cocaine possession and/or use decreased from 33 to 19 during the COVID-19 period (week ending 15 March through to week ending 26 April); similarly, the weekly number of incidents of ecstasy possession and/or use decreased from 21 to 13 over the same period.

*continued on page 27*

13. The patterns are similar for incidents of drug dealing and trafficking – an increase in the number of offences for amphetamines and cannabis, compared with large reductions in cocaine and ecstasy offences - but the numbers of these offences were much smaller per week, making inference more challenging.

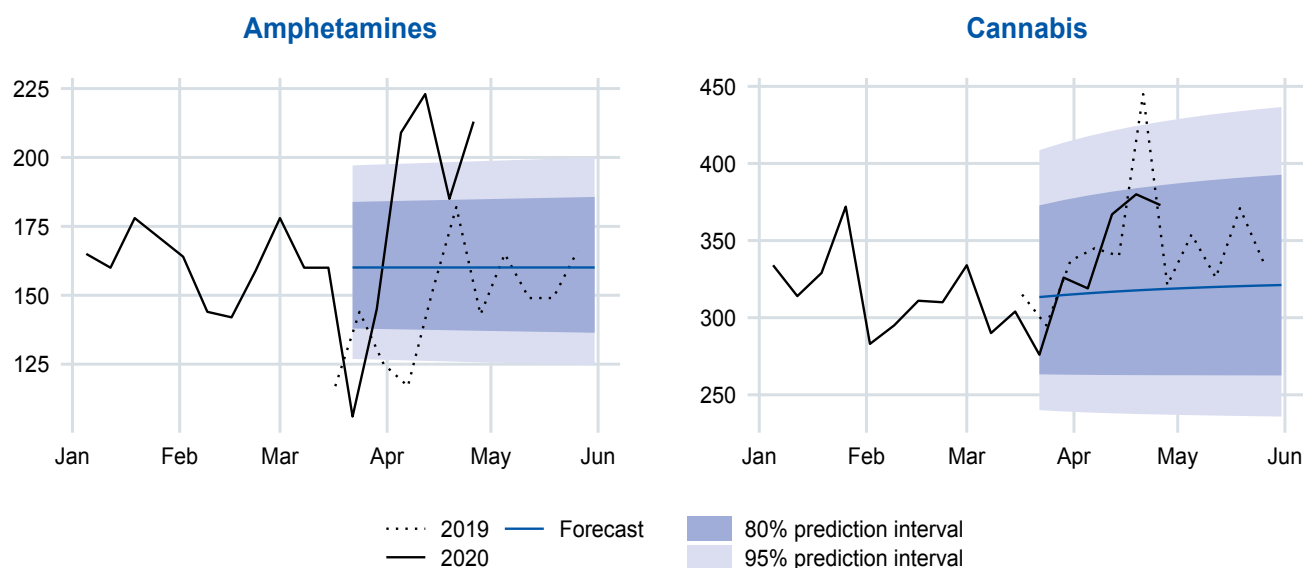
**Figure 8. Drug incidents per week in NSW, by subcategory**



**Table 6. Changes in the number of incidents of drug offences, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

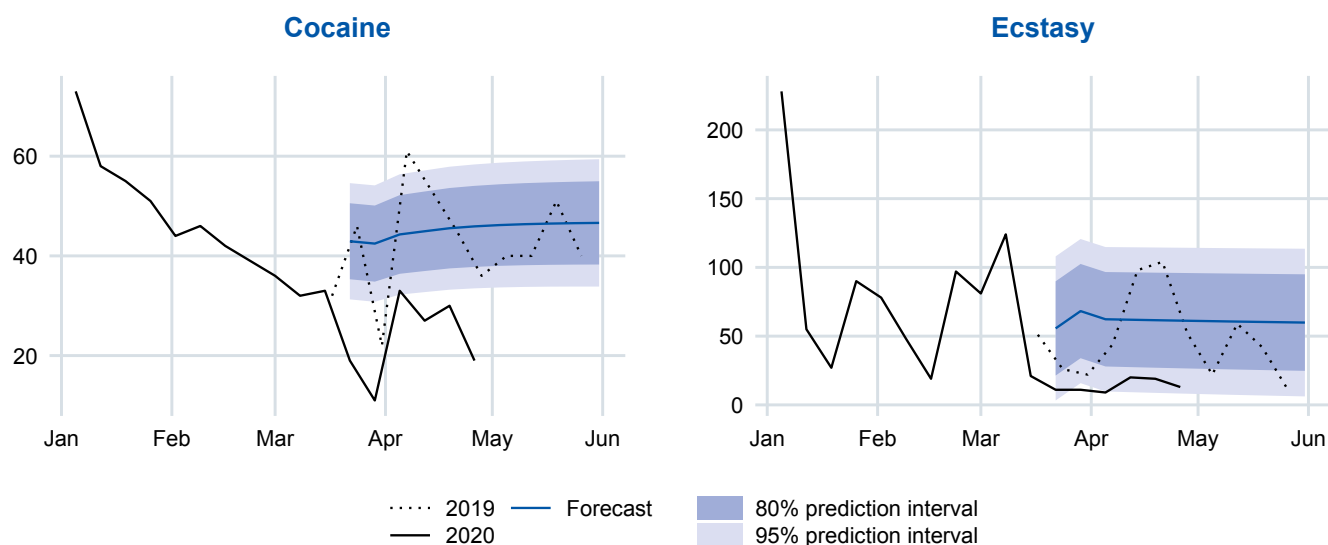
	Week ending 15 March	Week ending 26 April		April		
Offence	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	Average per week		% difference v forecast
				Incidents	Forecast	
Dealing, trafficking in drugs	165	70	-58%	90	91	-1%
Possession and/or use of drugs	654	768	17%	753	726	4%

**Figure 9. Drug possession incidents per week in NSW, amphetamines and cannabis**





**Figure 10. Drug possession incidents per week in NSW, cocaine and ecstasy**



**Table 7. Changes in the number of incidents of drug possession and/or use, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Drug type	Week ending 15 March	Week ending 26 April		April		
	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	Average per week Incidents	Forecast	% difference v forecast
Amphetamines	160	213	33%	208	160	30%
Cannabis	304	373	23%	360	317	14%
Cocaine	33	19	-42%	27	45	-40%
Ecstasy	21	13	-38%	15	62	-76%
Narcotics	25	30	20%	26	26	0%
Other	111	120	8%	118	119	-1%

*continued from page 25*

Compared with forecasts for the month of April, incidents of cocaine possession and/or use and ecstasy possession and/or use were down by 40 per cent and 76 per cent, respectively. The decrease observed for cocaine falls outside the 95 per cent prediction intervals estimated by the forecast model, but the decrease observed for ecstasy possession falls largely within the expected range.

## Justice Offences

**Breach Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) – consistent with forecast**  
**Breach bail conditions – consistent with forecast**

As with drug offences, justice order breaches are more heavily influenced by proactive policing efforts than offences reported earlier in this brief. Figure 11 shows the observed and expected number of

breaches of bail conditions and breaches of Apprehended Violence Orders.

As Table 8 shows, between 15 March and 26 April, 2020, there was a six per cent decline in breaches of Apprehended Violence Orders (from 345 to 326 incidents) and a one per cent decline in breaches of bail conditions (from 924 to 918 incidents). Compared to the forecasts for April, breaches of Apprehended Violence Orders increased by nine per cent and breaches of bail conditions increased by three per cent. However, these slight increases in breaches are consistent with the forecast model, with the observed number of breaches falling well within the 95 per cent prediction intervals.

**Compliance checks for Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) – up 85 per cent**  
**Compliance checks for bail conditions – up 13 per cent**

This section presents weekly numbers of police recorded AVO compliance checks

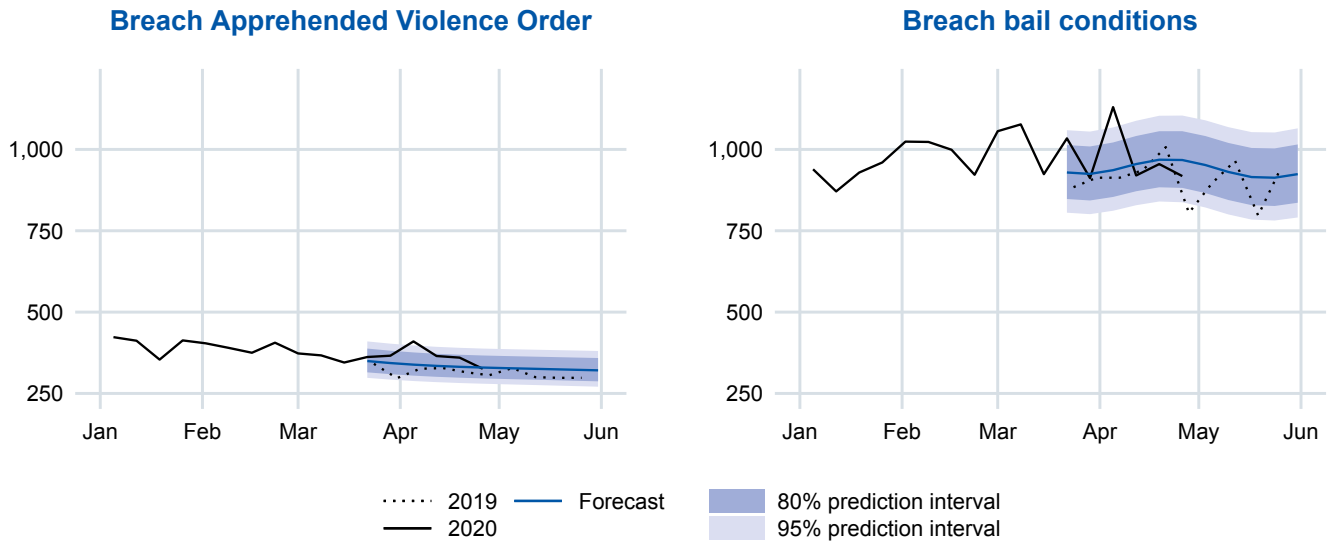
and bail compliance checks. These data can be considered reliable indicators of the level of police enforcement of both AVO and bail conditions. As can be seen from Figure 12, the volume of both AVO and bail compliance checks undertaken by police increased during the COVID-19 period under examination and the weekly counts fall largely outside the 95 per cent prediction intervals from the forecast models.

As shown in Table 9, the number of AVO compliance checks increased from 1,320 per week on 15 March to 1,933 per week on 26 April, 2020, an increase of 46 per cent. The increase was also pronounced for bail compliance checks; with 1,778 checks conducted in the week ending 15 March and 2,427 in the week ending 26 April (an increase of 37 per cent).

The forecast models predicted small declines in the number of compliance

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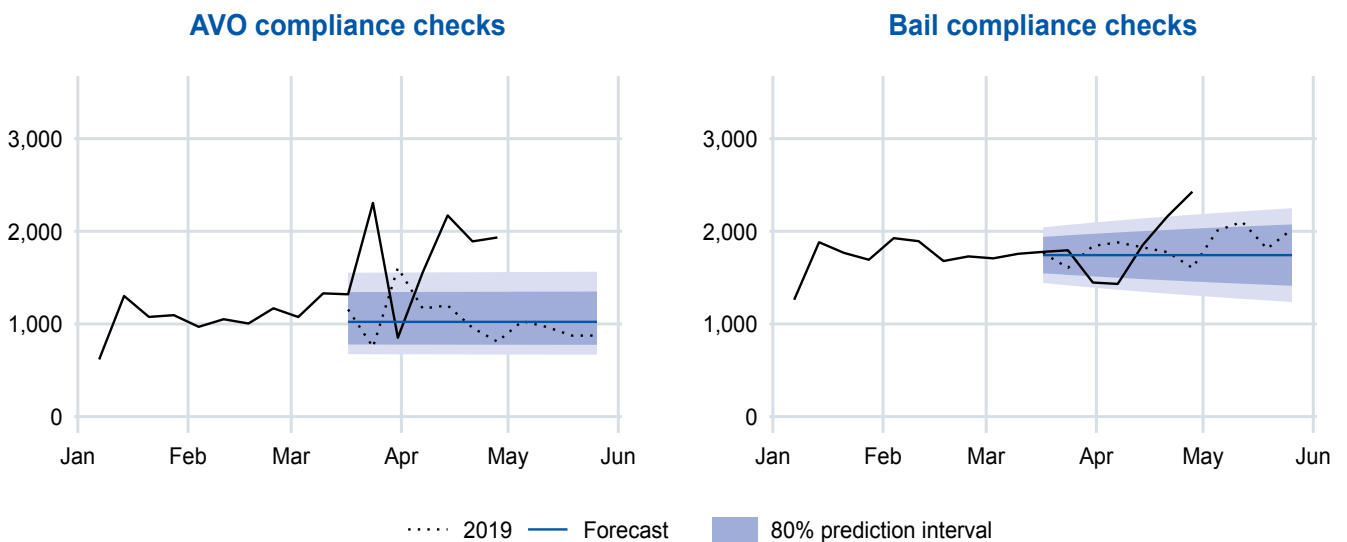
**Figure 11. Breaches of AVOs and bail conditions per week in NSW**



**Table 8. Changes in the number of incidents of breach AVO and breach bail conditions, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Offence	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	April		
				Average per week		% difference v forecast
				Incidents	Forecast	
Breach Apprehended Violence Order	345	326	-6%	365	334	9%
Breach bail conditions	924	918	-1%	981	957	3%

**Figure 12. Compliance checks per week in NSW**



**Table 9. Changes in the number of incidents of AVO and bail compliance checks, NSW, 15 March – 26 April 2020**

Offence	Incidents	Incidents	% change v 15 March	April		
				Average per week		% difference v forecast
				Incidents	Forecast	
AVO compliance checks	1,320	1,933	46%	1,888	1,023	85%
Bail compliance checks	1,778	2,427	37%	1,968	1,743	13%



continued from page 27

checks during April. Compared with expectations, AVO compliance checks increased by 85 per cent and bail compliance checks increased by 13 percent.

Given such a large increase in compliance checks, it is surprising that there was no accompanying increase in the number of breaches for either AVOs or bail conditions over the same period.

## SUMMARY

Since the start of the COVID-19 containment measures (i.e. between 15 March and 26 April 2020), there have been sharp falls in non-domestic related assault, sexual offences, robbery, break and enter (dwelling and non-dwelling), vehicle theft, stealing from vehicles and stealing from retail premises. Domestic violence related assaults

also decreased, but remained largely within expected ranges. Drug trafficking and drug possession offences were stable in aggregate while subordinate changes were observed among particular drug types.

Over the same six-week period, there has been a sharp increase in police compliance checks for people on bail and people subject to an Apprehended Violence Order, while bail and AVO breaches have remained relatively stable.

It is important to note a limitation of this study, namely, this study measures criminal incidents detected by, or reported to, police and is therefore not sensitive to changes in unreported offences. A fall in report ingrates could account for some of the crime decline reported here. This is more likely to affect offences known to be under-reported, such as, domestic violence and sexual offences, rather than well-reported crimes, such as, stealing.

These reductions in recorded crime in NSW closely coincide with the social distancing and isolation measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that, as these restrictions are relaxed and NSW residents resume regular activities, crime rates will return to normal levels. Weekly crime trends should therefore continue to be closely monitored.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats' (ADAPT) Study

### BACKGROUND

#### What are the aims of the ADAPT Study?

The Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT) Study is exploring the **short and long-term impact** of the **COVID-19 pandemic** on the experiences of **Australians who use illicit drugs**. Findings will be used to ensure drug-related issues during COVID-19 are better understood and more accurately represented, so as to better inform **drug treatment and harm reduction in Australia**.

#### What does the ADAPT Study involve?

Australians who regularly (i.e. at least once a month) used illicit drugs in 2019 were invited to complete an **online survey** initially and follow-up surveys in **2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years** and **3 years**. Participants could opt to complete the Wave 1 survey only.

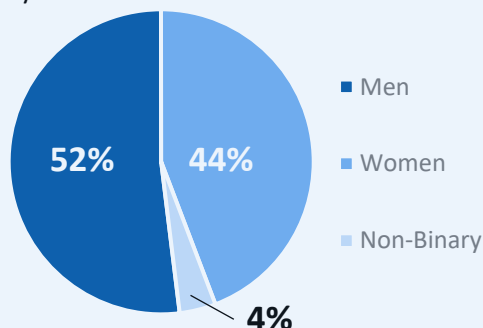
#### What have we found so far?

The information below outlines findings from the **702 eligible participants** who completed the Wave 1 survey from **29 April to 15 June 2020**.

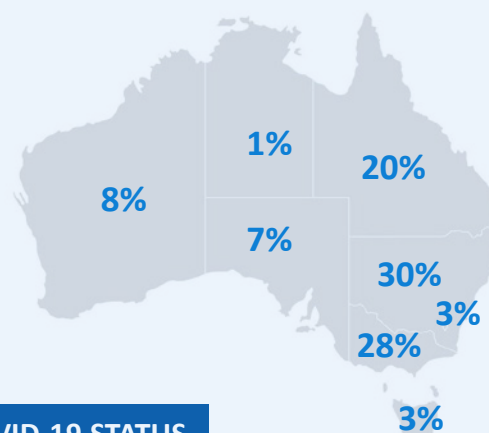
### DEMOGRAPHICS

The ADAPT sample mostly comprised **young, well-educated** (62% completed tertiary/university qualification) **capital city dwellers**, although notably one-quarter (25%) of participants reported living in **regional/rural/remote areas**.

Participants ranged in age from **18-67**, with a median age of **25 years**. Similar proportions of men and women took part, with **4%** of participants identifying as non-binary.



#### Participants were recruited from:



### COVID-19 STATUS

Most participants (86%) reported that they **had not experienced any COVID-19 symptoms, nor been tested**, at the time of interview. **10%** had been tested, with **no participants** reporting that they had tested positive (**<1%** **awaiting results**).

**10%**  
of the sample  
were tested for  
COVID-19

**Citation:** Sutherland, R., Baillie, G., Memedovic, S., Hammoud, M., Barratt, M., Bruno, R., Dietze, P., Ezard, N., Salom, C., Degenhardt, L., Hughes, C. & Peacock, A. (2020). Key findings from the 'Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT) Study. ADAPT Bulletin no. 1. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney. <http://doi.org/10.26190/5efbef7c8d821>

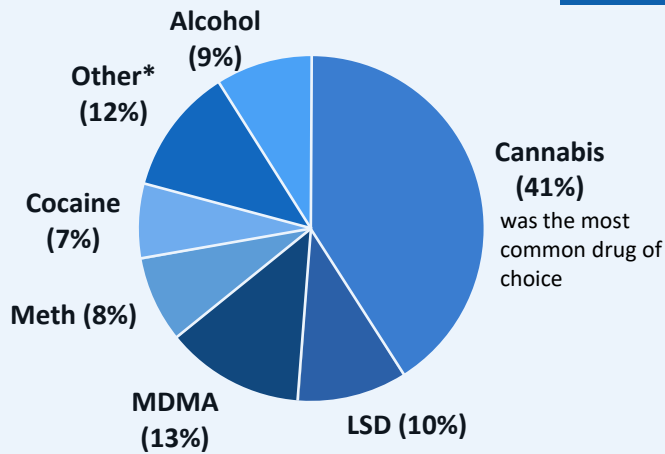


# ADAPT STUDY

Australians' Drug use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats

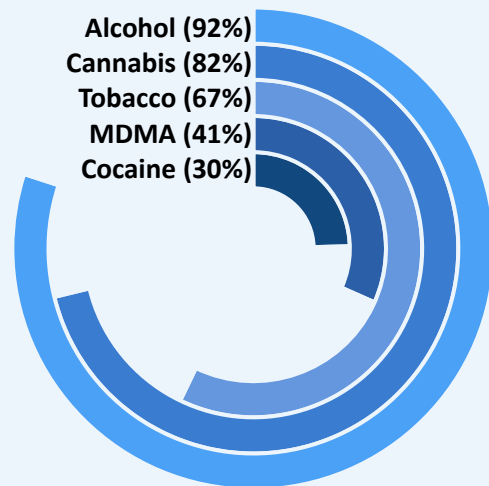
## DRUG USE

### Drug of Choice



\*Other includes ketamine (4%), heroin (3%), pharmaceutical opioids (3%), other (2%), benzodiazepines (1%), GHB (<1%), opioid agonist treatment (OAT) medication (<1%)

### Most commonly used drugs post COVID-19 restrictions\*



\*i.e since March 2020

## Participant Reports of Changes in their Drug Use Pre and Post COVID-19 Restrictions



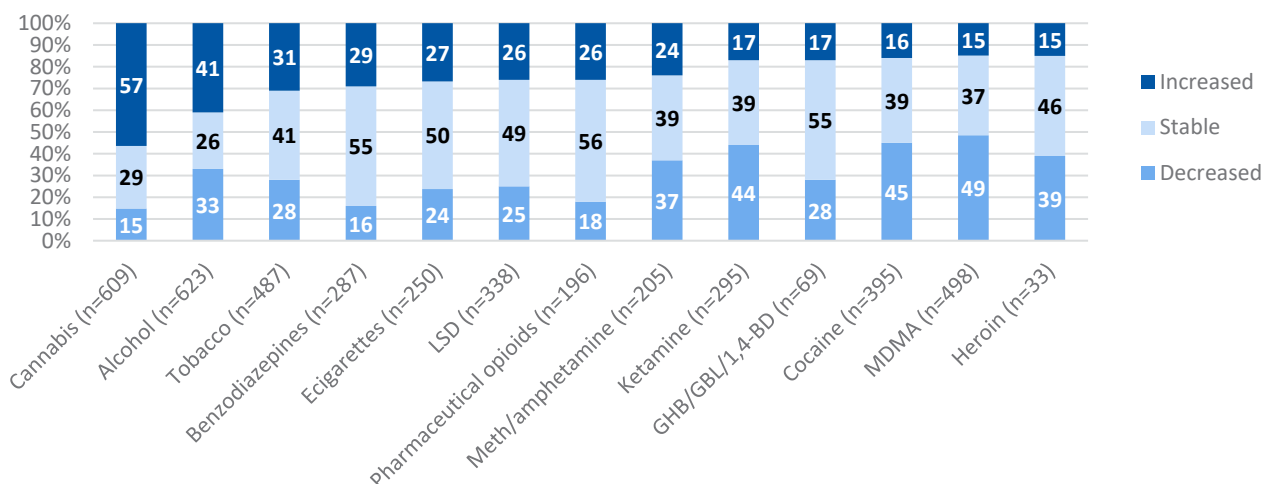
**Cannabis** and **alcohol** use had most commonly **increased** since the beginning of March (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions) as compared to before.



**MDMA**, **cocaine** and **ketamine** use had most commonly **decreased** since the beginning of March (i.e., since COVID-19 restrictions) as compared to before.



Use of **pharmaceutical opioids**, **GHB**, **benzodiazepines**, **e-cigarettes** & **LSD** had most commonly remained **stable** since the beginning of March.



## DRUG USE BEHAVIOURS



Most participants continued to receive their drugs in person (76% in Feb 2020 vs 66% past month).



There was a **small increase** in the proportion of participants who had their illicit drugs delivered to them (36% Feb 2020 vs 41% past month).



There was a **small increase** in those who did not obtain illicit drugs post March 2020 (4% in Feb 2020 vs 10% in past month).



**8%** reported injecting any drug since the beginning of March 2020 (10% past year, 16% lifetime)

## HARM REDUCTION (HR) BEHAVIOURS

In response to COVID-19 restrictions (i.e., since March 2020, n=685):

**25%**

Stocked up on illicit drugs



**12%**

Stocked up on prescribed medications



**36%**

Washed hands before handling drugs/money



**16%**

Wiped down drug packages with soap/sanitizer



**11%**

Prepared drug themselves



**24%**

Avoided sharing drug use equipment



Note: 10% reported engaging in other HR behaviours, and 30% reported engaging in none of the listed HR behaviours.

## DRUG-RELATED HARMS

**4%** reported an overdose since the beginning of March 2020 (13% past year, 31% lifetime)

## TREATMENT ACCESS & ENGAGEMENT

### Drug Treatment since March 2020

Treatment engagement was low. Of those who answered (n=593):

**4%**

Had accessed drug treatment in the past four weeks

**3%**

Tried but were unable to access drug treatment

### Mental health services since March 2020

Of those who answered (n=577):

**37%**

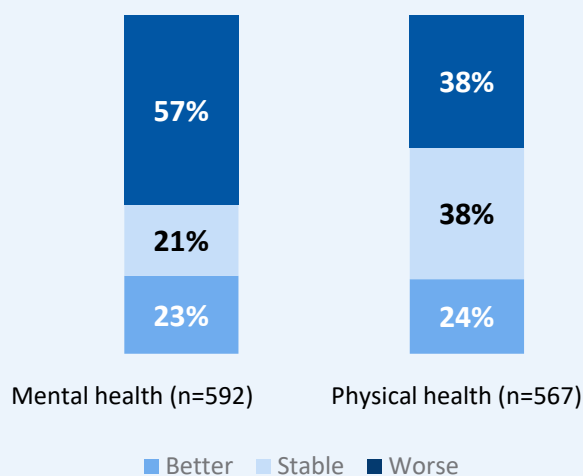
Had accessed help for mental health reasons in the past four weeks

**8%**

Tried but were unable to access mental health services

## CHANGES IN HEALTH RATINGS

Participants' mental health and physical health ratings in the past month vs February 2020 (pre COVID-19 restrictions)



## SUMMARY

- The ADAPT sample comprised mostly young, well-educated capital city dwellers. Being a convenience sample, findings from the ADAPT study cannot be considered representative of all people that use drugs.
- Cannabis and alcohol use had most commonly increased relative to before March 2020, while use of MDMA, cocaine and ketamine had most commonly decreased.
- Participants reported engaging in a range of behaviours to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 and/or minimise impact of COVID-19 restrictions since March 2020, including washing hands before handling drugs/money and avoiding sharing drug equipment.
- More than half of participants reported poorer mental health in the past four weeks relative to before March 2020, with almost two-fifths reporting that they had accessed help for mental health reasons in the past four weeks.
- A small proportion of the sample reported that they had tried but been unable to access drug treatment and/or mental health services post March 2020.
- It is critical to continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on different populations who use drugs (e.g., through the [SuperMIX](#) and [IDRS](#) interviews with people who regularly inject drugs).
- Findings from future surveys of the ADAPT sample will be reported on in future outputs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The participants who contributed their valuable time to share their experiences.
- The Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) for their support and advice in developing the project.
- All those who gave advice and shared information about the project.
- The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and the Australian Government Department of Health for funding support.

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4





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OFFICIAL MEDICAL ADVICE

# Coronavirus:

# Thanks to you, we are saving lives and stopping the spread.

## But it's important we continue to keep all Australians safe.

**Stay at home unless necessary and avoid non-essential travel.**

Banks, supermarkets, petrol stations, medical services and suppliers remain open.



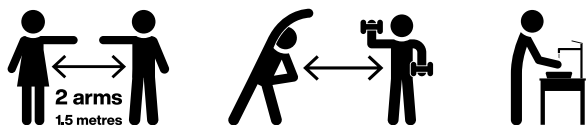
**If you can, you should work from home.**

Use phones for meetings, stop handshaking, tap to pay where possible instead of using cash.



**Maintain physical distancing and hygiene practices.**

Keep 1.5 metres of physical distance, exercise away from others, and wash your hands regularly for 20 seconds.



**Visit [australia.gov.au](https://australia.gov.au) to find restrictions specific to your State or Territory.**

Authorised by the Australian Government, Canberra

# Pot, pills and the pandemic: how coronavirus is changing the way we use drugs

June 26, 2020 6.13am AEST

**AMY PEACOCK**

Senior Research Fellow, UNSW

**RACHEL SUTHERLAND**

Research fellow, UNSW

There's no question COVID-19 has changed many aspects of our lives. As drug researchers, we are interested in how the pandemic has affected illicit drug use in Australia.

Our two new surveys of Australians who regularly use illicit drugs show people most commonly reported no change or a reduction in their use of various illicit drugs since COVID-19 restrictions came into effect.

While this may be perceived as a good thing, for people who regularly use drugs, a period of decreased use can heighten the risk of adverse effects, such as overdose, later on.

## Tracking drug trends

Many experts, ourselves included, predicted significant shifts in drug trends as governments around the world introduced restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19.

Evidence from major environmental, economic, and other past crises suggests the COVID-19 pandemic may have substantial effects on:

1. drug use (for example, switching to different substances or being unable to obtain drugs)
2. drug procurement (for example, shifts to online purchasing and buying drugs in larger quantities)
3. drug markets (for example, changes in price, purity and availability of illicit drugs).

These changes may increase the risk of drug-related harms, such as withdrawal, drug dependence and overdose. This could be especially problematic given challenges in delivery of drug treatment and harm-reduction services during COVID-19.

We wanted to see if Australians who use illicit drugs had experienced these changes.



Two in five people we surveyed said they were using cannabis more during COVID-19.

We conducted telephone interviews with 389 Australians who live in capital cities and regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants.

We also conducted an online survey of 702 Australians who regularly used illicit drugs in 2019.

We recruited participants for both studies between April and June via social media.

## Drug use

Overall, we found the use of most illicit substances had largely remained stable

or decreased since March. People most commonly reported they were using drugs like MDMA, ketamine and LSD at a similar level or less than they were before the pandemic.

Conversely, at least two in five people across both studies reported they were using more cannabis than before COVID-19.

These findings are unsurprising given cannabis is mostly used in private homes, whereas drugs like MDMA are more commonly used in public settings such as nightclubs or festivals.



**Fewer social gatherings like festivals means less use of some illicit substances.**

### Drug procurement

Most participants across both studies continued to obtain drugs face-to-face. But about 10% reported they had reduced face-to-face collection of drugs, obtained drugs less frequently, and bought drugs in larger quantities since COVID-19 restrictions.

People also reported trying to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 by washing their hands before handling drugs, and avoiding sharing equipment such as pipes, bongs, needles and syringes.

And about 10% of participants reported seeking information on how to reduce their risk of COVID-19 when using drugs.

These findings refute stigmatised views that people who use illicit drugs are reckless with their health.

### Drug markets

Our participants largely perceived the illicit substances they sought were no less available since the start of restrictions.

The exception was MDMA pills; half of participants we interviewed by phone said they were “more difficult” to obtain.

These findings are surprising given illicit drugs like heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine are typically detected at the Australian border, and air travel has been restricted with COVID-19.

However, the effects of COVID-19 on price, purity and availability of drugs may take time to become apparent and will vary by substance.

### Reduced drug use is not always a positive

Participants commonly said their reduced substance use was a result of limited opportunities to “go out” and socialise. So as restrictions start to ease, it seems likely people will again increase their use of substances like MDMA and cocaine.

Resuming substance use after a period of abstinence or reduced use can increase the risk of harms such as overdose due to reduced tolerance to the effects of the drug.

Harm-reduction strategies — like taking smaller doses, spreading out doses during a session and having a sober person present — can help reduce the risk of these outcomes if people start to use drugs again or use larger amounts.

Peer-based organisations and online resources offer information and advice on how to reduce risk when using drugs.

### We need broader research

Our samples mainly comprised young, educated capital city dwellers recruited via social media. Very few of our participants reported drug dependence or were engaged in drug treatment.

We need research exploring how COVID-19 has affected those who report more problematic patterns of use, like people who regularly inject drugs.

This group may be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 given underlying health issues, poorer health literacy, stigma, and higher economic and social vulnerabilities.

In responding to the impacts of COVID-19 on drug use, we need to remember that evidence shows punitive responses to drug control increase social and economic costs.

We believe our findings reinforce the importance of pursuing drug policies and research focused on health, human rights and harm reduction.

### Disclosure statement

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# The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic

**HAYLEY BOXALL, ANTHONY MORGAN AND RICK BROWN**

## Abstract

This paper presents the findings from an online survey of 15,000 Australian women about their experience of domestic violence during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the three months prior to the survey, conducted in May 2020, 4.6 percent of women who responded to the survey experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner. Almost six percent (5.8%) of women experienced coercive control and 11.6 percent reported experiencing at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour.

For many women, the pandemic coincided with the onset or escalation of violence and abuse. Two-thirds of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in the three months prior to the survey.

Many women, particularly those experiencing more serious or complex forms of violence and abuse, reported safety concerns were a barrier to help-seeking.

Since the first case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was confirmed in Australia in January 2020, both the disease and the measures implemented to limit its spread have had significant impacts on the day-to-day lives of Australians.

In the past few months there have been numerous media reports about the risks to the safety of victims of domestic violence (intimate partner violence), including concerns about an increase in violence, more complex forms of violence, and the impact of social distancing measures on the ability of victims to seek help (Morton 2020; Nancarrow 2020; Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020). Various factors have been identified as contributing to a potential increase in both the prevalence and severity of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- victims and offenders spending more time together;
- increased social isolation and decreased social movement, which may restrict avenues for women to seek help;
- increased situational stressors associated with domestic violence (eg financial stress and job insecurity);
- offenders feeling out of control due to situational factors and using violence and abuse as a means of creating a sense of control; and
- increased alcohol consumption among domestic violence perpetrators (Delaney 2020; Morton 2020; Nancarrow 2020; Payne, Morgan & Piquero 2020).

Contrary to international research (Ashby 2020; Jaramillo 2020; Mohler et al. 2020), recent Australian evidence from New South Wales and Queensland suggests

that domestic violence reported to the police did not increase in March or April 2020 (Freeman 2020a, 2020b), nor did the number of protection order breaches (Payne, Morgan & Piquero 2020). Although some Australian domestic violence and men's behaviour change services have reported an increase in calls for support since February 2020, other service providers have reported a decrease or no change in their client numbers (Gleeson 2020; Morton 2020; Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020; Tuohy 2020; Women's Safety NSW & Foundation for Alcohol Research & Education 2020).

There is a lack of research into the prevalence of domestic violence among Australian women since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the majority of women experiencing violence and abuse within their relationships do not engage with police or government or non-government agencies—particularly while they remain in a relationship with their abuser—this is a significant gap in knowledge (ABS 2017). Relatedly, there are concerns that opportunities for women to contact and engage with domestic violence services or the police have been even more constrained during periods when social movement was restricted (Fitz-Gibbon & Meyer 2020). There are particular concerns about the safety of women experiencing coercive controlling behaviour (Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020).

To address these emerging issues, we set out to answer the following questions:

- What was the prevalence and nature of domestic violence experienced by Australian women during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What causal mechanisms may explain any observed relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic violence?

This paper focuses on the first of these questions.

## Method

This paper presents the results of an online survey of 15,000 women aged 18 years and over. Respondents were asked about their experience of domestic violence in the last three months, as well as their experience of prior domestic violence. The aim was to measure the prevalence of violence since the beginning of February 2020, when COVID-19 first started impacting Australia.

The focus of this study was on women's experience of violence, given the overwhelming evidence that women are over-represented as victims of domestic violence (ABS 2017) and domestic homicide (Bricknell 2020), experience significant harms associated with domestic violence (AIHW 2019), and were expected to be disproportionately affected by violence in the home during the pandemic (Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True 2020).

Domestic violence is defined here as physical violence, sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour involving intimate partners. This includes attempted behaviours and face-to-face threats. The focus of this paper is on partner violence, which refers to physical and sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour that occurs within current and former cohabiting relationships. A cohabiting partner is a person the respondent lives with, or lived with at some point in the last 12 months, in a current or former married or de facto relationship.

Coercive controlling behaviours involve the micro-regulation of women's lives (Stark 2007). This can involve a range of behaviours perpetrators use as a means of controlling their partner, including frequent belittling and derogatory comments, monitoring

**Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (weighted data) (n=15,000)**

	n	%
<b>Age</b>		
18–24	1,689	11.3
25–34	2,770	18.5
35–44	2,466	16.4
45–54	2,378	15.9
55–64	2,178	14.5
65+	3,519	23.5
Average age (years)	47.6	
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander <sup>a</sup>	565	3.8
Non-English-speaking background <sup>b</sup>	2,799	18.7
Current long-term health condition restricting everyday activities <sup>c</sup>	1,778	11.9
<b>Highest level of education completed<sup>d</sup></b>		
Year 9 or below	406	2.7
Year 10/11 or equivalent	1,837	12.3
Year 12 or equivalent	2,265	15.1
Vocational certificate	4,195	28.0
University	6,296	42.0
<b>Usual place of residence<sup>e</sup></b>		
Major cities	11,315	75.4
Regional	3,330	22.2
Remote	355	2.4

a: Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information. Denominator includes 99 respondents who did not want to disclose this information b: Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information

c: Defined as someone who said they had a health condition that had lasted or was expected to last six months or longer and, because of this condition, they were restricted in or needed help or supervision with day-to-day activities. Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information

d: Excludes 1 respondent who did not provide this information

e: Regional classification calculated using the respondent's postcode and concordance with the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ABS 2018) Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

of their whereabouts, interfering with their relationships and financial abuse. For further detail of the definitions used, see the *Technical appendix*.

The survey was conducted by i-Link Research Solutions between 6 May and 1 June 2020. It took respondents approximately 10 minutes to complete. There were several important measures in place to ensure the safety of respondents (see the *Technical appendix*). The survey was sent to female members of the research company's online panel aged 18 years or over. Proportional quota sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used. Data were subsequently weighted by age and jurisdiction to reflect the spread of the Australian population using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2019) on the estimated resident population as at June 2019. All data

presented in this paper are weighted. Although the sample was not weighted by other sociodemographic factors, comparisons with population data and estimates from nationally representative surveys indicate there was a high level of concordance between the survey sample and the wider Australian female population (see *Technical appendix*). While a large sample of women were surveyed, the use of non-probability sampling from an online panel means that not everyone had an equal likelihood of being selected to participate in the research. Results are specific to the women who participated in the survey and cannot be generalised to the wider female population.

The survey included questions about sociodemographic and relationship

*continued on page 40*

characteristics and women's experiences of physical or sexual violence, and emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey. The physical and sexual violence survey items were taken from the 2016 Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2017). Emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours were measured using items derived from the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory–Short Form (PMWI-SF) Dominance–Isolation subscale (Tolman 1999). Other items relating to emotional abuse and stalking were drawn from the Personal Safety Survey and modified, and a question about technology-facilitated abuse was added. This better reflects a contemporary understanding of the emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours that characterise non-physical forms of domestic violence (Dragiewicz et al. 2018; Monckton Smith 2019; Woodlock et al. 2019).

Previous studies have developed a cut-off score using the PMWI-SF to distinguish more serious levels of psychological violence (Começanha & Maia 2018). However, the current study relied on a modified set of questions and dichotomous response items instead of questions about the frequency of behaviour. This was necessary to capture as wide a range of abusive behaviours as possible within the strict time limit imposed for safety reasons. For the purpose of this study, the presence of coercive control was determined on the basis of a respondent reporting three or more of the 13 emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours described in the survey, indicating a pattern of controlling behaviour. Our estimate of coercive controlling behaviour is likely conservative. For this reason, the prevalence of fewer than three emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours is also reported.

Further information on the methodology, key definitions, sampling strategy, safety protocols and limitations of the survey is provided in the *Technical appendix*.

### Sample characteristics

In the final weighted data, 32.0 percent of respondents lived in New South Wales, 26.2 percent in Victoria, 19.9 percent in

**Table 2: Relationship characteristics of respondents who had been in a cohabiting relationship in the past 12 months (weighted data) (n=7,763)**

	n	%
<b>Relationship status</b>		
Current partner	7,432	95.7
Former partner	331	4.3
<b>Gender of partner</b>		
Male	7,360	94.8
Female	344	4.4
Intersex/indeterminate	8	<1
Do not want to disclose	51	<1
<b>Children within the relationship</b>		
At least one child with partner	4,247	54.7
Average number of children with partner (range) <sup>a</sup>	2.1 (1–8)	
Pregnant at time of survey <sup>b</sup>	278	3.6
Any children living in household	3,147	40.5
Average number of children living in household (range) <sup>c</sup>	1.8 (1–8)	

Note: Limited to women who said they had been in a cohabiting relationship with a current or former partner for at least some of the 12 months prior to completing the survey

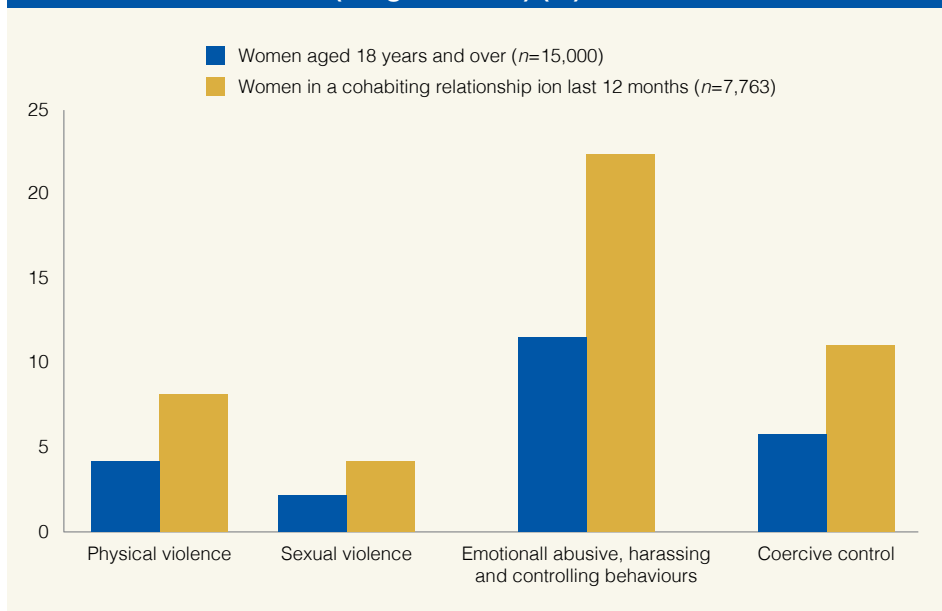
a: Limited to women who said they had at least one child with their current or former partner

b: Denominator includes 68 women who said they were not sure if they were pregnant at time of survey

c: Limited to women who said they had at least one child living with them, either full time or part time

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

**Figure 1: Prevalence of domestic violence experienced by respondents in the last three months (weighted data) (%)**



Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Queensland and 10.1 percent in Western Australia. Smaller proportions resided in South Australia (7.1%), Tasmania (2.2%), the Australian Capital Territory (1.7%) and the Northern Territory (0.9%). This is consistent with the ABS (2019) estimated resident population as at June 2019.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

The average age of respondents was

48 years, and approximately half of the sample was below the age of 45 years at the time of completing the survey (46.2%). Nearly four percent of respondents identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (3.8%), and one in five (18.7%) said that they spoke a language other than English

continued on page 42



Table 3: Physical and sexual violence experienced by respondents in the last three months (weighted data) (%)		
	Overall prevalence among respondents (n=15,000)	Prevalence among respondents who experienced physical or sexual violence (n=685) <sup>a</sup>
	%	%
Pushed, grabbed or shoved the respondent	3.3	71.7
Threw something at the respondent that could hurt them, or slapped, bit, kicked or hit them with a fist	2.4	52.7
Forced the respondent to take part in sexual activity against their will	2.2	47.1
Choked/strangled the respondent or grabbed them around the neck	1.9	41.6
Hit the respondent with something that could hurt them, beat them, stabbed them with a knife or shot them with a gun	1.6	35.1
Physically assaulted the respondent or hurt them in any other way	2.1	45.2
At least one form of physical or sexual violence	4.6	–
More than one form of physical or sexual violence	3.1	68.3
Average number of types of physical or sexual violence experienced	–	2.5

Note: Includes threatened behaviours and face-to-face threats of physical or sexual violence

a: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported experiencing physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

Table 4: Emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours experienced by respondents in the last three months (weighted data) (%)		
	Overall prevalence among respondents (n=15,000)	Prevalence among respondents who experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour (n=1,737) <sup>a</sup>
Constantly insulted the respondent to make them feel ashamed, belittled or humiliated; or shouted, yelled or verbally abused the respondent to intimidate them	5.5	47.2
Was jealous or suspicious of the respondent's friends	5.4	46.2
Monitored the respondent's time and made them account for their whereabouts	4.8	41.3
Used the respondent's/shared money or made important financial decisions without talking to them	4.7	40.2
Interfered with the respondent's relationships with other family members	3.9	33.8
Accused the respondent of having an affair	3.3	28.5
Tried to keep the respondent from doing things to help themselves	2.8	24.3
Threatened to hurt themselves	2.7	23.5
Damaged, destroyed or stole the respondent's property	2.7	23.4
Threatened or abused respondent online or through the use of technology (eg mobile phone)	2.7	22.9
Stalked the respondent online or in person	2.6	22.3
Restricted the respondent's use of their phone, the internet or the family car	2.6	22.2
Threatened to hurt the respondent's family, friends, children and/or pets	2.1	17.9
At least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour	11.6	–
More than one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour	7.7	66.7
Three or more forms of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour (coercive control)	5.8	49.7
Average number of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours	–	3.9

a: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported experiencing emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

most of the time at home (ie were from non-English-speaking backgrounds). One in eight respondents (11.9%) had a long-term health condition which they said restricted their ability to undertake day-to-day activities unassisted.

The majority of respondents had completed Year 12 or equivalent, with two in five (42.0%) reporting that they had a university qualification. One in four (24.6%) respondents reported their usual place of residence was in a regional or remote area, while 75.4 percent were living in a major city (as defined by the ABS).

Overall, 51.8 percent (n=7,763) of women in the sample reported that they had been in a cohabiting relationship for at least some of the 12 months prior to the survey (95.7% in their current relationship). Further, of the women who were in a cohabiting relationship with a current or former partner in the past 12 months:

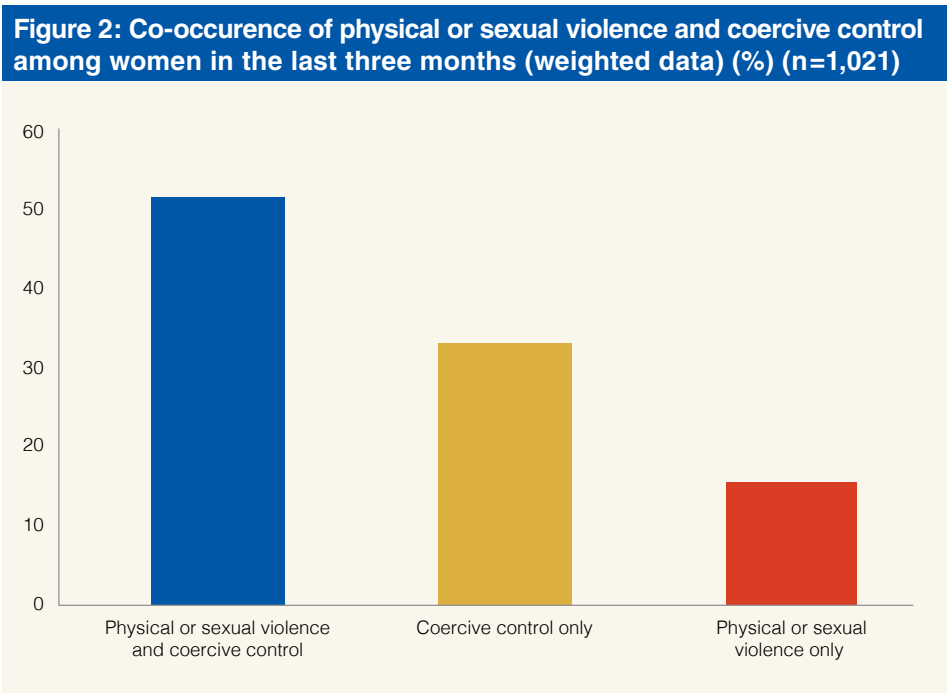
- 94.8 percent said their partner was male, and 4.4 percent said their partner was female;
- 54.7 percent had at least one child with their partner (average 2.1 children);
- 40.5 percent had at least one child living with them, either full time or part time (average 1.8 children); and
- 3.6 percent said they were pregnant at the time of completing the survey (Table 2).

Results

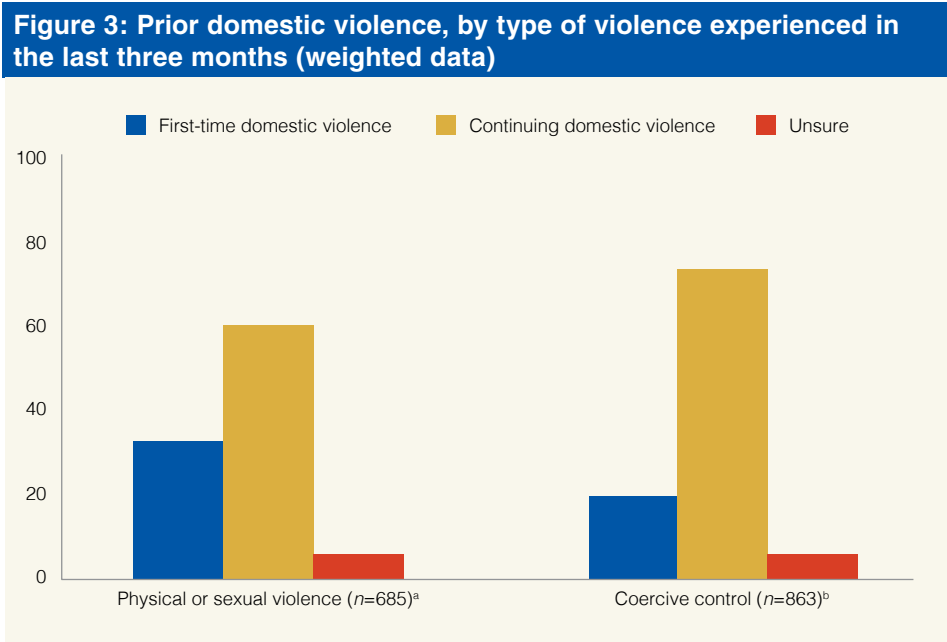
The prevalence of domestic violence among Australian women

Overall, 4.6 percent of all women who responded to the survey reported experiencing physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey. This increased to 8.8 percent when the sample was limited to women who had been in a cohabiting relationship in the previous 12 months.

- As shown in Figure 1:
- 4.2 percent of all women and 8.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced physical violence;
  - 2.2 percent of all women and 4.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced sexual violence; and



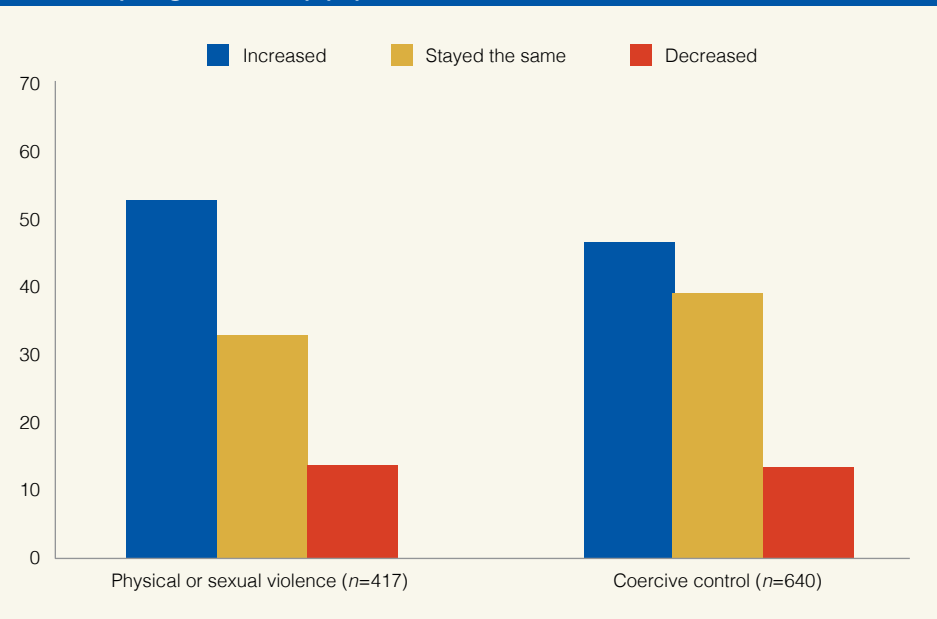
Note: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported experiencing physical or sexual violence or coercive control in the three months prior to the survey  
Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]



Note: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported that they had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding of weighted figures  
a: Total includes 41 women who were unsure whether they had experienced physical or sexual violence prior to February 2020  
b: Total includes 51 women who were unsure whether they had experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour prior to February 2020  
Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

- 11.6 percent of all women and 22.4 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours.
- Further, 5.8 percent of all women, and 11.1 percent of women in cohabiting relationships, experienced coercive control, meaning they experienced three or more forms of emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours in the three months prior to the survey. Overall, 6.8 percent of all women, and 13.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships, experienced physical violence, sexual violence or coercive control in the three months prior to the survey.

**Figure 4: Changes in the frequency or severity of physical or sexual violence or coercive control among women who had experienced prior domestic violence, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%)**



Note: Limited to women who reported they were in a cohabiting relationship in the past 12 months, had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey and had experienced violence or abuse from their partner prior to February 2020. Respondents could report experiencing both physical or sexual violence and coercive control  
Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

### Nature of domestic violence experienced by Australian women

Information about the specific forms of violence and abuse experienced by women in the three months prior to the survey is presented in Tables 3 and 4. Among women who reported they experienced physical or sexual violence in the last three months, the most common forms of violence experienced were pushing, grabbing or shoving (71.7%); having things thrown at them, slapping, biting, kicking or hitting (52.7%); and sexual violence (47.1%; Table 3). The majority of these women reported multiple forms of violence during this period (68.3%; mean=2.5).

Among women who experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour over the last three months, the most common forms of abuse reported were constant verbal abuse and insults (47.2%), jealousy or suspicion about the respondent's friends (46.2%) and monitoring their time and whereabouts (41.3%). Two-thirds of women (66.7%) reported that they had experienced more than one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour in the three months prior to the survey, with victims reporting an average of nearly four

(3.9) different types of emotional abuse, harassing or controlling behaviours (Table 4).

Many women reported experiencing multiple forms of physical or sexual violence and emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour in the last three months. However, it was also common for women to report experiencing both coercive control and physical or sexual violence (Figure 2). Among women who experienced either physical or sexual violence or coercive control (n=1,021; 6.8% of respondents), half (51.6%) reported experiencing both forms of abuse. By comparison, experiencing physical or sexual violence (15.5%) or coercive control (32.9%) in isolation was less common. Further, of those women who experienced coercive control, 61.1 percent also reported physical or sexual violence. Relatedly, of women who reported physical or sexual violence, 76.9 percent also reported coercive control. This highlights the complex nature of the domestic violence that many respondents experienced.

Among those women who reported they had experienced physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey, one in three (33.1%)

said that this was the first time their partner had been violent towards them. Similarly, 19.9 percent of women who had experienced coercive control said that this was the first time they had experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour within their relationship (Figure 3). Overall:

- 1.5 percent of all women and 2.9 percent of women in cohabiting relationships had been a victim of physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner *for the first time* in the last three months.
- 2.8 percent of all women and 5.4 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour by a current or former cohabiting partner *for the first time* in the last three months.

1.1 percent of all women and 2.2 percent of women in cohabiting relationships experienced coercive control by a current or former cohabiting partner for the first time in the last three months, meaning they had not experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour prior to February 2020.

### Changes in the frequency or severity of domestic violence

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the onset of domestic violence for many women. However, most women who experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey said they had also experienced physical or sexual violence or coercive control (or both) by their partner prior to February 2020. Women who reported violence as ongoing were also asked whether the frequency and severity of violence had increased, decreased or stayed the same, relative to the six-month period prior to February 2020.

Among women who had experienced physical or sexual violence from their current or former cohabiting partner prior to February 2020, half (53.1%) said the violence had increased in frequency or severity (Figure 4). One in three women (33.1%) reported that the violence had stayed the same, and a minority said that it had decreased (13.9%). Further, 47.0 percent of women who experienced coercive control before and after February 2020 said the abuse

*continued on page 44*



had increased in frequency or severity, 39.3 percent said it had remained the same and 13.7 percent said it had decreased.

Overall, this means that 65.4 percent of women who experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey had experienced either violence for the first time by that partner or an escalation in the frequency and severity of prior violence. Similarly, 54.8 percent of women who experienced coercive control from a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey said either that they had experienced emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour by that partner for the first time, or that the abuse had escalated since February 2020.

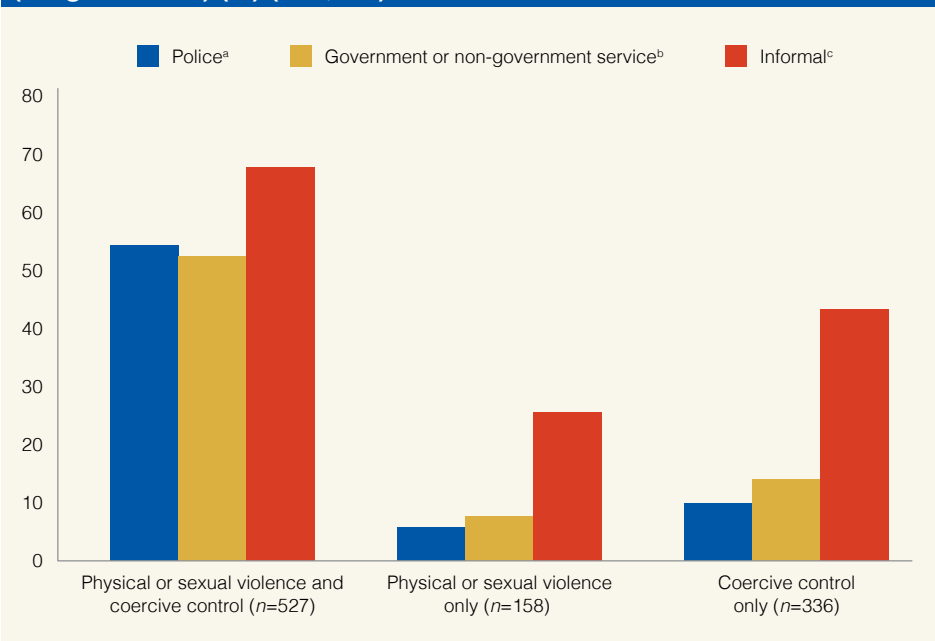
### Help-seeking among women who experienced domestic violence

Women who experienced physical or sexual violence in the three months prior to the survey were asked whether police had been notified about the most recent incident, either by them or by someone else. Two in five (42.1%) women reported that the police had been notified after the most recent incident of physical or sexual violence. Specifically, one in three women (31.2%) said they had called the police, while another 10.9 percent said that someone else had notified the police. More than half (56.0%) said that the police had not been notified following the most recent incident (2.0% were unsure whether police had been notified).

Women who experienced physical or sexual violence or coercive control in the three months prior to the survey were also asked whether they had sought support or advice in relation to their partner's behaviour at any time in the three months prior to the survey. Sources of support included the police, government and non-government support services, and informal sources (eg family members and spiritual leaders). They were not asked whether someone else had sought help or support on their behalf.

Among women who had experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 54.1 percent said they had contacted the police, 52.5 percent

**Figure 5: Help-seeking among respondents who experienced domestic violence, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%) (n=1,021)**



Note: Limited to women who were in a cohabiting relationship and reported that they had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey. Respondents could report experiencing both physical/sexual violence and coercive control

a: Total includes 8 women who experienced physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 3 women who experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation and 5 women who experienced coercive control in isolation who were unsure whether they had sought advice or support from police in the three months prior to the survey

b: Total includes 12 women who experienced physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 3 women who experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation and 4 women who experienced coercive control in isolation who were unsure whether they had sought advice or support from government or non-government support services in the three months prior to the survey

c: Total includes 18 women who experienced physical or sexual violence and coercive control, 4 women who experienced physical or sexual violence in isolation and 8 women who experienced coercive control in isolation who were unsure whether they had sought advice or support from informal sources in the three months prior to the survey. Informal sources of support include friends, family members, spiritual leaders, work colleagues, employers etc

Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

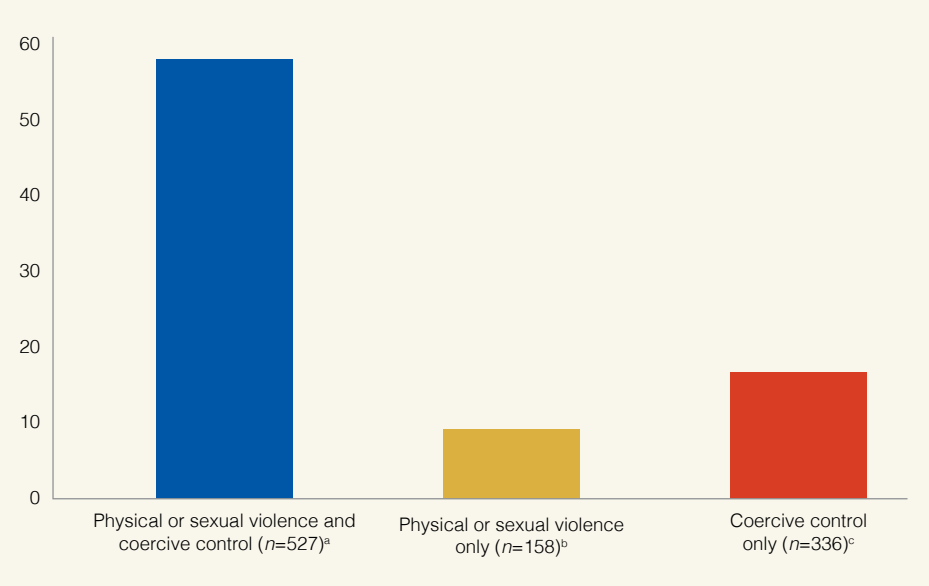
sought support from a government or non-government service and 67.7 percent said they reached out to informal sources of support (Figure 5). Around one in five women (22.3%) who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control in the three months prior to the survey had not sought help from formal or informal sources of support.

Much smaller proportions of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence but not coercive control sought help from the police (5.8%), government or non-government services (7.8%) or informal sources of support (25.6%). Two-thirds (67.1%) of these women had not sought help from any source over the last three months. Similarly, only a small proportion of women who experienced coercive control but not physical or sexual violence had contacted police over the last three months (10.0%). Around one in seven (14.1%) sought

help or support from government or non-government services, while two in five (43.2%) sought help or support from informal sources. Half (49.5%) of these women had not sought help from any source over the last three months.

The different patterns of help-seeking described in Figure 5 are explained in part by variations in the patterns and likely impact of violence and abuse experienced by women in the three groups. Closer analysis of the three groups revealed that women who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control reported more frequent and severe forms of physical and non-physical abuse. For example, 50.7 percent of women who reported both physical or sexual violence and coercive control said that their partner had attempted to strangle or choke them in the three months prior to the survey, compared with 11.4 percent of women who reported

**Figure 6: Women who experienced domestic violence who were unable to seek support on at least occasion due to safety concerns, by type of violence experienced in the last three months (weighted data) (%) (n=1,021)**



Note: Limited to women who reported they were in a cohabiting relationship in the past 12 months and had experienced domestic violence in the three months prior to the survey  
a: Total includes 37 women who said they were unsure about having experienced barriers to help-seeking in the three months prior to the survey  
b: Total includes 6 women who said they were unsure about having experienced barriers to help-seeking in the three months prior to the survey  
c: Total includes 21 women who said they were unsure about having experienced barriers to help-seeking in the three months prior to the survey  
Source: Impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence survey, AIC [computer file]

physical or sexual violence but not coercive control. Further, one in three women (31.3%) who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control reported 10 or more emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours in the last three months, compared with 3.9 percent of women who experienced coercive control but not physical or sexual violence.

Overall, more than a third of women (36.9%) who experienced either physical or sexual violence or coercive control said that, on at least one occasion, they wanted to seek advice or support but could not because of safety concerns. Importantly, over half (58.1%) of those women who experienced both physical or sexual violence and coercive control from a current or former cohabiting partner in the three months prior to the survey said that on at least one occasion they did not seek help due to safety concerns. Smaller proportions of women who reported physical or sexual violence but not coercive control (9.0%), or coercive control but not physical violence (16.7%), reported they did not seek help due to safety concerns. This highlights the potential barriers to seeking help that many women

experienced during the initial stages of the pandemic—particularly those who experienced more complex and serious violence and abuse (Figure 6).

**Conclusion**

This study provides the strongest evidence available about the prevalence of domestic violence experienced by Australian women during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. One in 20 women (4.6%) experienced physical or sexual violence over the last three months, 5.8 percent experienced coercive control, and one in 10 (11.6%) experienced at least one form of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviour perpetrated by a current or former cohabiting partner.

Critically, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have coincided with the onset of physical or sexual violence or coercive control for many women. For other women, it coincided with an increase in the frequency or severity of ongoing violence or abuse. Two-thirds of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic said the violence had started or escalated in the three months prior

to the survey. Similarly, more than half the women who experienced coercive control reported the onset or escalation of emotionally abusive, harassing or controlling behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although a significant proportion of women did seek help from police, government or non- government agencies and informal sources, many were unable to because of safety concerns. This is consistent with the concerns raised by many in the support services sector that they found it difficult to engage with women during this period of social distancing. It also helps to explain why the number of domestic violence incidents reported to police has not increased (Freeman 2020b).

A cross-sectional survey does not allow cause–effect relationships to be established. Nevertheless, it appears likely that the conditions and consequences associated with the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in domestic violence. These drivers of increased violence are complex, but likely involve some combination of the increased time spent at home, social isolation due to social distancing requirements and financial stressors associated with the economic impact of COVID-19.

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General editor, *Statistical Bulletin series*: Dr Rick Brown, Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Criminology. For a complete list and the full text of the papers in the *Statistical Bulletin series*, visit the AIC website at: [aic.gov.au](http://aic.gov.au)

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AAP Image/Joel Carrett

# Pandemic policing needs to be done with the public's trust, not confusion

April 8, 2020 4.55pm AEST

**DARREN PALMER**

Associate professor, Deakin University

The law on what we can and can't do during the coronavirus outbreak is changing on an almost hourly basis. Some of what is written now might be overtaken by the shifts in the pandemic powers of control.

But we need to make sure people have trust in any new powers given to authorities. These need to be clear to all, and applied consistently and transparently, which is not the case at the moment.

For example, over the weekend a Victorian teenager was fined A\$1,652 for leaving home to go for a driving lesson with her mother. Police said their activities were "non-essential travel".

For those asking - yes - we've seen a copy of the actual infringement notice handed yesterday to a 17yo L Plater having a training drive with mum in the rain yesterday.

The advice from New South Wales police at that time said such activities were fine in NSW. Victoria police have since withdrawn the fine.

But NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller told the ABC's Fran Kelly that in NSW you cannot travel to your holiday home unless it is "essential". Victorians are told they can head to their holiday homes over Easter as long as they otherwise maintain strict quarantining on arrival.

These are just two examples in two states of a broader underlying problem that Americans would deem unconstitutionally "void for vagueness", a law invalid because it's not sufficiently clear.

Calls for common sense do little to ease concerns that things are likely to worsen. The broad coronavirus containment and mitigation strategies might continue for many more months.

## Remember the Fitzgerald inquiry

Perhaps we can learn from the landmark Fitzgerald inquiry into Queensland policing, more than three decades ago.

The inquiry identified widespread systemic corruption in police, politics and civil society. This inquiry represented a change in police accountability.

There is another, lesser-known or appreciated aspect of the Fitzgerald inquiry. It emphasised that police must have the consent of the community: police have to ensure their practices generate trust that people will be treated fairly and police discretion will be used appropriately.

These are standard issues in the policing scholarship.

*continued on page 48*





The Ruby Princess at Port Kembla in NSW. AAP Image/Dean Lewins

VP Form 508G  
Enforcement Agency - Victoria Police

## INFRINGEMENT NOTICE

ISSUING OFFICER NAME: [REDACTED]

REGISTERED NUMBER: [REDACTED]

STATION: [REDACTED]

SERVICE TYPE: ☒ Personal ☐ Post

Date of Infringement Notice: 05/04/20

The Infringement Penalty must be paid by the Specified Due date of: 03/05/20

Reform Act 1998 ☐ Summary Offences Act 1966 ☒ Other Act (specify) CRIMES

Brief Description of Infringement Offence Alleged	Infringement Penalty
Non-essential travel - COVID 19	\$ 1652

An infringement notice issued by Victoria Police.

*continued from page 47*

Pandemic policing raises many issues that cut to the core of policing by consent.

How policing resources are mobilised and the decision-making processes and practices on the ground are vital. Just look at the confused circumstances of the disembarkation of the Ruby Princess cruise ship in Sydney, which has been a key cause of the spread of COVID-19 in NSW and beyond.

The Australian Border Force, NSW health authorities and NSW police were variously blamed, so surely there needs to be a major investigation into network failure and specific responsibilities.

### Police discretion needs to be fair

Everyday street policing is central to pandemic policing: when do police decide to intervene and ask someone their purpose for being out and about?

Vague legislative provisions are often the source of poor use of discretion

by police. But the answer is not to be found in taking away any discretion, the hallmark of “zero-tolerance policing”.

There are many things that might be done, but a few simple ones come to mind.

Any legislation or regulation must be precisely drafted. This has not been happening and is causing confusion. Just look at the level of uncertainty in NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

We need clearly stated offences, clear lines of reasoning and a clear demarcation between preferred practice or guidance and regulated conduct.

For instance, what does staying in your own “area” for permitted out-of-home travel mean?

A discussion on ABC radio in Melbourne recently descended into callers chastising a man who thought he would like to travel to the beach for exercise well away from his residence. Live on air, he asked Victoria Police

Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton if that was okay.

The chief commissioner didn't say yes or no, he just called for “common sense”. But what would be reasonable and common sense – 1km, 2km, 5km or 10km, etc? Is driving to exercise allowed?

### More than common sense

Common sense is not the way to ensure police discretion is going to be used appropriately, nor does it give the community confidence in the law. It might only be the odd case here and there at the moment causing confusion or consternation but it is changing daily.

Data on the use of this discretion must be recorded and made publicly available in close to real time. Equally important is the need to have data on policing activities.

Most jurisdictions have a crime statistics agency and these agencies should be given responsibility to collate data to identify who is being stopped, where, for what offence and with what outcomes. Report this every day as we do health data.

It does not need to be data on the final outcome that determines whether the fine is paid or challenged in the courts some months later. But it needs to reflect the immediate policing activities and it needs to be made public and in a timely manner.

As the pandemic continues, and it may get worse, pandemic policing might head in directions the broader population has never experienced.

So 30 years on from Fitzgerald, we need to reinforce the notion that policing by consent, with transparency and accountability, is vital.

If public support is to be maintained over the course of the pandemic we need to make sure we have legal clarity and a detailed understanding of what is being done in the name of the exception. Pandemic policing must have very real limits and robust, real-time accountability.

### Disclosure statement

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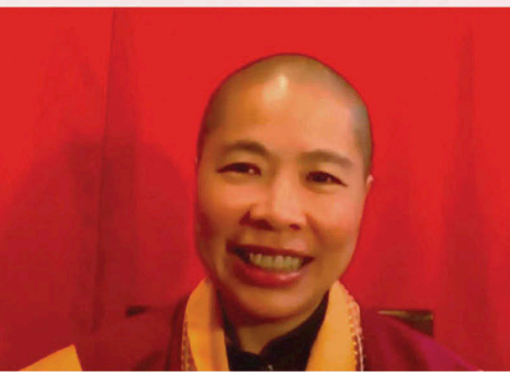
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The 12th Academic Symposium of Chinese Han Transmission Esotericism Academy was held online with Zoom.

It was the first time the Symposium was conducted online and live-streamed to a worldwide audience, thanks to the newest technology available today.

The main discussion topic was “A Brief Discussion on How Humanity Can Draw Philosophical Inspiration From and Reflect on COVID-19”.

The main part of the Symposium was dedicated to discussing submitted theses. In total, 145 papers were received this year.

Dharma masters, scholars, and members of the Academy from around the world attended, totalling approximately 500 attendees. They connected to the Zoom event and watched the Academic Symposium's proceedings from various parts of the world, including different Australian cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane), New Zealand, China, USA, Japan, Sri Lanka, Canada, Indonesia, Hong Kong SAR, Vietnam, Mexico, Laos, Taiwan and more.



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