

Mental health support, not increased policing, needed during pandemic, study finds

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A new study finds that while most crime types declined across Canada and internationally as a result of the COVID-19 social restrictions, mental health-related incidents remained relatively stable, counter to claims that mental health related incidents increased across the nation as a result of the pandemic related restrictions.

The study, published in the *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, suggests that calls for additional policing services to respond to [mental-health](#) related demands may be unwarranted and that focus on preventative measures is key.

"Our findings suggests that [police](#) resourcing may not be an important focus during an exceptional event such as a pandemic," says Simon Fraser University criminology professor Martin Andresen, the study's co-lead. "Rather, we suggest that funding may be better spent on preventative strategies that improve evidence-based predictors of mental health such as housing, [basic income](#), and social services."

"For instance, research has shown that the impact of the pandemic was not distributed evenly and disproportionately impacted women, people experiencing illness, people with previous mental health-related issues, and other marginalized groups," says Andresen.

Andresen and Wilfrid Laurier University assistant professor Tarah Hodgkinson analyzed mental health-related calls from 13 police jurisdictions across Canada from March 2019 to November 2021.

They used open-source data from the Canadian Center for Justice and Community Safety Statistics, Statistics Canada to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on police-reported mental health-related calls.

Digging into the data

Researchers looked at calls for property and violent crimes, which decreased in almost all jurisdictions. One notable exception was London, Ontario where violent crime increased by 30 percent during the pandemic.

The team found that Mental Health Act apprehensions increased in 10 out of 13 police services with the exception of Calgary and Regina. Apprehensions are made by [police officers](#) when individuals are considered a danger to themselves or others, and result in a medical assessment at a medical facility.

Ontario Provincial Police, Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, Toronto, and Waterloo Region all recorded statistically significant increases in Mental Health Act (MHA) apprehensions (47, 12, 10, and 13 percent respectively). Meanwhile researchers found an almost complete lack of MHA apprehensions in Vancouver reported to Statistics Canada.

They generally found no increases in calls to police for suicide or suicide attempts during COVID-19 with statistically significant decreases in Halton Region, Toronto, Vancouver and York Region.

However, calls to police categorized as mental health (other) increased in Toronto, Regina, and Ottawa. In particular, researchers found a large-magnitude increase in volume for Toronto.

Takeaway

A rise in mental health (other) calls to police could suggest that certain jurisdictions may be more vulnerable and in need of improved or expanded [social services](#).

Instead of dedicating additional funding to [police services](#) during a crisis, researchers suggest income supports and support for those struggling

with addictions in vulnerable and marginalized communities will help address the mental health issues reducing the need for police assistance.

More information: Martin Andresen et al, Stumbling from One Disaster to Another: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health Calls for Police Service across Canada, *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* (2022). [DOI: 10.3138/cjccj.2022-0016](https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj.2022-0016)

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