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Police-recorded crime trends in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic

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This paper aims to examine whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic, associated behaviour changes and implemented restrictions impacted on crime in Victoria. It examines whether there were changes in the volume, nature or location of offending recorded by police following the introduction of restrictions in late March 2020 and provides an overview of offences recorded for breaching restrictions introduced to address COVID-19. While the overall number of offences recorded between April and June 2020 was similar to the number recorded during the same period in 2019, in 2020 there were decreases in the number of property and deception offences recorded and small increases in the number of drug and justice procedures offences recorded. Since March, 6,062 offences have been recorded by police for breaches of COVID-19-related restrictions. The analysis identified that the number of family violence incidents recorded in May and June was significantly higher than what would be expected based on trends over the past five years. Continuing to monitor volumes of family violence incidents recorded throughout the pandemic and triangulating these with other family violence related indicators is paramount to ensuring victim safety.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, offending rates, crime trends, family violence

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic describes the global spread of COVID-19, a disease caused by a new strain of a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus. With no existing community immunity and no vaccine available, governments around the world have introduced physical distancing measures to contain outbreaks of this highly contagious and - at times - fatal virus. In March 2020, following the World Health Organisation's (WHO) declaration of a global pandemic, the Victorian government implemented its first restrictions aimed at limiting interpersonal contact to curb the spread of COVID-19 (see Section 1.1).

For Victorians, life during the pandemic has involved working from home wherever possible, remote learning for students, temporary closures of some businesses and activities deemed non-essential, and new sanitation practices, including the introduction of mask-wearing in public. Mobility data provides a snapshot of the pandemic's significant impact on everyday life in Melbourne's Central Business District (CBD). During March 2020, Melbourne's CBD saw average daily foot traffic of 534,869. In April this decreased to 131,160 as Melbournians followed directives to stay at home¹.

¹ Data source: City of Melbourne – Pedestrian Counting System (<http://www.pedestrian.melbourne.vic.gov.au/>)

It has been anticipated that these disruptions to regular work and social activities, business operations and travel would have flow-on effects on crime rates. A recent study by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) compared criminal incidents observed over six weeks from 15 March to 26 April 2020 with previously predicted (non-pandemic) rates. Like Victoria, during this period the strictest restrictions were in place in NSW throughout April, and criminal offences were introduced for people who left their homes without a reasonable excuse. Robberies declined by 42% when compared with predicted rates, and other property and theft related offences followed similar downward trends (Kim and Leung, 2020). There were no significant changes to drug-related offence rates, however the types of drugs involved did change: possession of amphetamines increased by 30% and cocaine and ecstasy declined by 40% and 76% respectively. A decline in the number of domestic violence related assaults recorded was observed, however this was consistent with expected seasonal decline towards winter. Breaches of Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) and bail conditions were consistent with forecasts, despite large increases in compliance checks over this period (Kim and Leung, 2020).

Another study compared observed violent crime rates recorded for Queensland in March 2020 with predicted crime rates based on historical crime rate modelling. The observed rate of common assaults in March 2020 was 14.6 per 100,000, which was consistent with predicted rates. Rates of serious assaults, sexual assaults and breaches of Domestic Violence Orders were lower than forecasted, however they were all within the range of statistically plausible values for March 2020 based on historical modelling (Payne and Morgan, 2020). The researchers noted that these results were preliminary: although confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Queensland were increasing in March, social distancing restrictions were only introduced in the second half of March.

A study of police recorded crime in England and Wales found that overall there was a reduction in criminal offences during their lockdown period in 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. In March 2020, when restrictions came into effect, there was a 10% decline in recorded criminal offences compared with March 2019. Strict restrictions were introduced on 23 March requiring people to stay home, stop social gatherings, and the closure of some businesses. There was a further decline in crime in April 2020, with 25% fewer offences recorded than in April 2019. Despite restrictions beginning to ease from mid-May, 20% fewer offences were recorded in May 2020 compared with May 2019. The largest declines in offence volumes during this period were for theft offences, criminal damage and arson. In contrast, drug offences increased by 22% in April and 44% in May 2020 compared with respective months in 2019 (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Alongside behavioural and mobility changes, there have been changes to Victoria's policing powers during this time. New COVID-19 penalty infringement notices (fines) have been introduced for individuals and businesses in breach of public health orders. Other operational changes have also been instituted by Victoria Police in response. Under Operation Shielding, for example, the Protective Services Officers (PSOs) who ordinarily patrol train stations at night have also been given an expanded remit to patrol shopping centres and other 'major activity' areas in the community and enforce COVID-19 restrictions.

1.1 Family violence during COVID-19

Recent survey-based research conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) identified that many women have experienced the onset or escalation of domestic violence since the beginning of February 2020. Sixty-five per cent of the 417 survey respondents who had previously experienced physical or sexual violence said the violence had increased in frequency and/or severity. The research also found that safety concerns have been a barrier to help-seeking during the pandemic (Boxall, Morgan and Brown, 2020). These safety concerns may contribute to decreased reporting of family violence to police or other services. Analysis of New South Wales (NSW)

crime data, volumes of police call-outs and calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line (which provides 24-hour assistance for victims) did not find any evidence of increases in domestic violence during March and April (Freeman, 2020).

Victoria Police commenced a new family violence taskforce, Operation Ribbon, on 13 April 2020. Operation Ribbon was launched in response to the potentially heightened risk of family violence associated with lockdown measures. It involved police conducting checks on known high-risk perpetrators and their victims, monitoring victim safety and ensuring compliance with family violence orders. It is not possible to determine the impact of Operation Ribbon on the number of family violence incidents or breach of family violence order offences that occurred between April and June, as operational information is not systematically recorded in police databases. However, it should be noted that Operation Ribbon may have contributed to increases in the number of incidents recorded in Victoria due to increased monitoring of perpetrator behaviour.

1.2 Victorian restrictions

The first case of COVID-19 in Victoria was confirmed on 25 January 2020. By 3 March ten cases were confirmed, all of whom were recently returned overseas travellers or cruise ship passengers (Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, 2020a). A state of emergency was declared in Victoria on 16 March. This provided the Chief Health Officer with additional powers to issue directions to restrict movement to help contain the spread of COVID-19. At this time 94 cases had been confirmed in Victoria, including some cases suspected to have been acquired through community transmission (Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, 2020b).

In late March, restrictions were introduced to limit non-essential activities, movement and close personal contact to limit the spread of the virus. An on-the-spot COVID-19 penalty infringement notice of \$1,652 for individuals and up to \$9,913 for businesses was introduced to enforce restrictions. Key dates for the introduction of restrictions (and the easing of restrictions in May and June) are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Key dates for the Victorian Government’s COVID restrictions

	Restrictions are introduced
March 23: Stage 1 restrictions limit non-essential activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Gatherings are limited to 500 people outdoors and 100 people indoors. · Restaurants and cafes are limited to providing take-away service only. · Venues including pubs, gyms, cinemas, casinos, places of worship and others are closed.
March 25: Stage 2 restrictions shut down non-essential activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Venues and activities including pools, galleries, museums, libraries, beauty salons, real estate auctions and others are closed.
March 30: Stage 3 Stay at home restrictions	People are permitted to leave their home for four reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · shopping for food and supplies · medical care and caregiving · exercise · study or work (if unable to work or study from home).
	Easing of restrictions begins
May 12: Small gatherings of friends and family permitted	People are permitted to leave home to visit friends and family: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Up to five visitors are permitted in homes · Outdoor gatherings are limited to 10 people.
June 1: Restaurants resume dine-in service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Restaurants and cafes resume dine-in service with up to 20 patrons per enclosed space.

Rising case numbers and increasing rates of community transmission saw the reintroduction of stage three and then stage four restrictions and mandatory face coverings in July and August. However, as this paper examines offending recorded up to 30 June, restrictions associated with this 'second wave' will not be examined in this paper.

1.2 The current study

The aim of this paper is to examine changes in recorded crime and family violence in Victoria during the period following the introduction of restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, using currently available crime data to the end of June 2020. Based on research from other jurisdictions, it was anticipated there would have been decreases in the volume of offences recorded for some types of crimes (particularly property crimes). The number of family violence incidents may also have changed due to the heightened risk of family violence associated with the lockdowns and increased monitoring of high-risk perpetrators by Victoria Police. Specifically, the paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Did the number of criminal offences recorded in Victoria decrease following the introduction of restrictions in late March 2020?
2. Were there changes in the types of offences recorded and/or the locations where they were recorded following the introduction of restrictions?
3. Did the number and/or key characteristics of alleged offenders change while restrictions were in place?
4. Did the number of family violence incidents recorded by police change following the introduction of restrictions?
5. How many breach of COVID-19 restriction offences were recorded between their introduction in March and June 2020?
6. When and where were breach of COVID-19 restriction offences most likely to occur?
7. What were the characteristics of people recorded for breach of COVID-19 restriction offences? Did they have histories of prior offending?
8. Were alleged offenders recorded for breach of COVID-19 offences concurrently recorded for other types of offences?

2. Method

This analysis examines Victoria Police data, extracted from the Law Enforcement Assistance Database (LEAP) on 18 July 2020. Broad crime trends are analysed for the first six months of 2020 compared with the first six months of 2019, and more specific analyses compare the period from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020 with the same period in 2019.

Recorded offences include any criminal act or omission by a person or organisation for which a penalty could be imposed by the Victorian legal system. For the purpose of this analysis, offences are counted at the date they are first recorded on the LEAP system and offences that are recorded but remain unsolved at the date the data was extracted are included in total figures. Unique offenders are counted at the date they were processed by police in relation to an offence. All references to offence types in this paper use the Crime Statistics Agency (CSA) Offence Classification Index (CSA, 2015).

A family violence incident was considered to have occurred if Victoria Police completed an L17 Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Report form. The Victoria Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence states this form is to be completed for all family violence incidents, interfamilial-related sexual offences and

instances of child abuse reported to police (Victoria Police, 2019). An L17 risk assessment may be completed by police even if the perpetrator’s behaviours or actions are not a criminal offence, guided by the principle that any form of family violence is unacceptable (Victoria Police, 2019).

All references in this paper to offences, offenders, and family violence incidents recorded by police are alleged rather than proven.

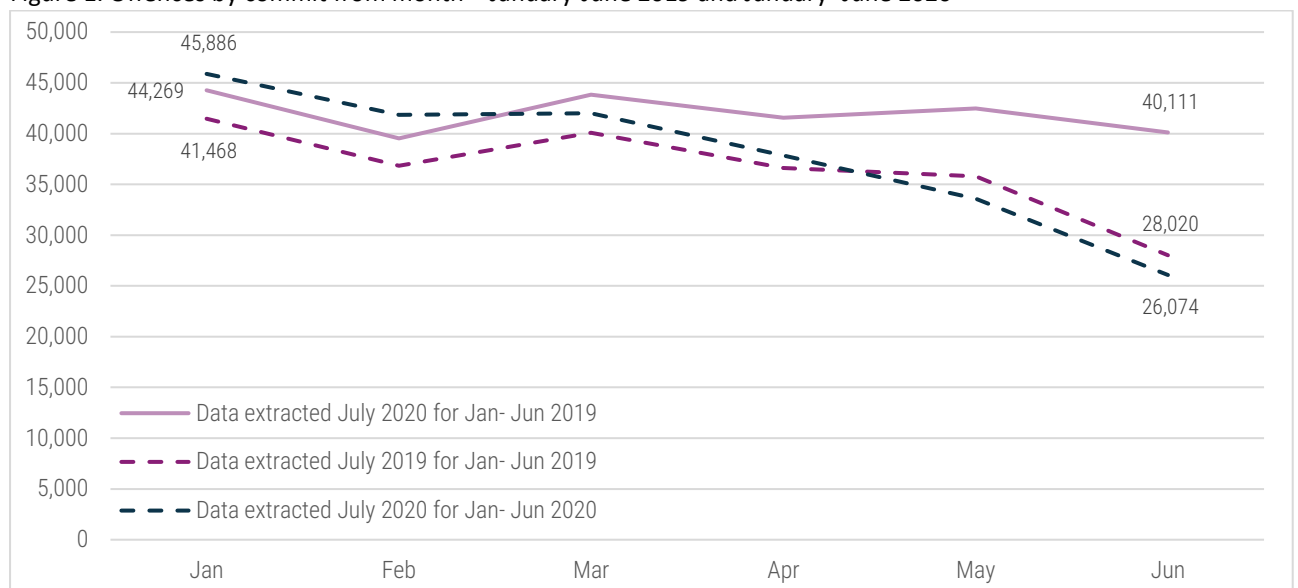
2.1 Victoria Police crime recording during COVID-19

A number of dates are recorded in the Victoria Police LEAP database in relation to an offence, including:

- *Create date* – the system-generated date on which a crime is entered into the database
- *Commit date* – the police-entered date on which a crime is alleged to have occurred
- *Offender processed date* – the date on which police took action against an alleged offender in relation to an offence.

For some crime types, there is often a significant delay in the reporting of crimes to police. There can also be some administrative time lag in entry of crimes into police databases after they are reported to or detected by police. CSA has determined that due to the lag in crime records being put into administrative systems, analysis undertaken using the commit date to report on how many crimes occurred during a period can significantly undercount the number of crimes that occurred during the final three months of data extracted from police databases. As shown in Figure 1, if data extracted in July 2019 was used to count the number of offences that occurred in July 2019, 28,020 offences would have been counted. However, if data extracted in July 2020 is used to count the number of offences that occurred in July 2019, 40,111 would have been counted. Use of commit date results in a retrospective increase in the number of offences reported. As a result, the CSA usually uses create date to count offences, as this is more stable and not subject to variation over time. The create date reflects the date at which the offence was officially recorded and came to the formal attention of Victoria Police.

Figure 1. Offences by commit from month – January-June 2019 and January -June 2020



Victoria Police have advised that due to additional policing demands arising during the pandemic, there was an increased time lag in entry of crime reports into their LEAP database following the occurrence of crimes, particularly during April 2020². Police advise that this COVID-19 related administrative lag was largely rectified in May and June 2020. Of all offences recorded in the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020, 25% had a commit date prior to that period. In 2019, 22% of offences recorded between 1 April and 30 June had a commit date prior to that period. This suggests that for the entire period from April to June 2020, the lag in entry of offences into the LEAP database was within the normal range of observed variation.

Given this paper primarily counts offences using create date, it should be noted that changes in monthly trends during this period may reflect time lags in police recording practices rather than changes in the crime rate. While this complicates interpretation of monthly crime trends during this period, given rectification of the lag during May and June, analyses based on the whole period from April to June 2020 are robust and this period can validly be compared with the same period in 2019.

It should also be noted that Victoria Police have advised that family violence incidents were not susceptible to the same counting issues and recording delays as criminal offences throughout this time. This is because Victoria Police policy states that police officers must submit family violence reports by the end of their shift, and that supervisors must assess and approve these reports within eight hours.

This paper does use commit date to examine breach of COVID-19 restriction offences, as this enables analysis of when these occurred in relation to specific events such as the introduction and easing of the various restrictions, and because it was not necessary to compare the volumes of these that occurred with those that occurred in a prior period. Finally, offender processed date was used to count the number of unique alleged offenders processed by police in relation to offences, as it was not subject to the same lags as offence and commit dates.

2.2 Statistical analyses

Two statistical analyses were used to compare the 2019 and 2020 non-COVID offender populations. Chi-square tests of homogeneity were performed to test categorical demographic variables (sex, country of birth, Aboriginal status) across the population groups. A t-test was also performed to compare offenders' age across 2019 and 2020. Where the significance level associated with each test (indicated by the symbol p) was less than .05, this indicates that there was a statistically significant difference between the 2019 and 2020 offender populations.

A Holt-Winters forecasting model was used to forecast the expected number of family violence incidents that would occur in 2020, based on historical data. These were compared with the actual number of incidents that occurred between April and June 2020 to determine whether the number that occurred during the COVID-19 period was above or below what would be expected based on historical data. This is an exponential smoothing method that incorporates seasonality in the production of estimates. The forecasted values were presented from this model, along with 95% confidence interval bands. Where the actual volume recorded falls outside of these confidence intervals, the actual figure is considered to be significantly different to what was expected.

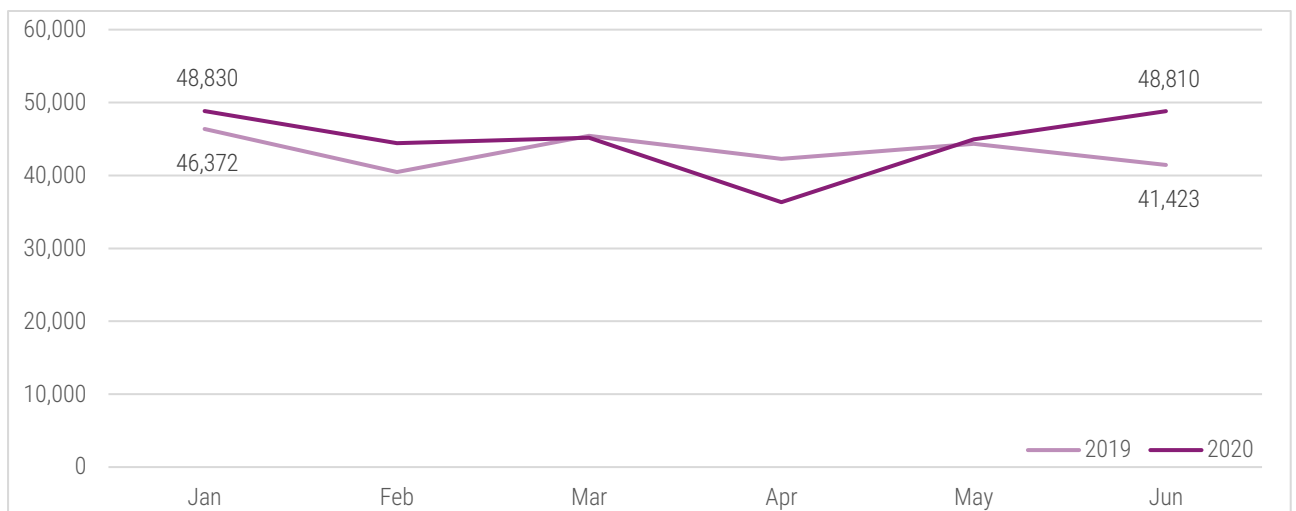
² For more information, see: <http://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/about-the-data/explanatory-notes>

3. Results

3.1 Offences

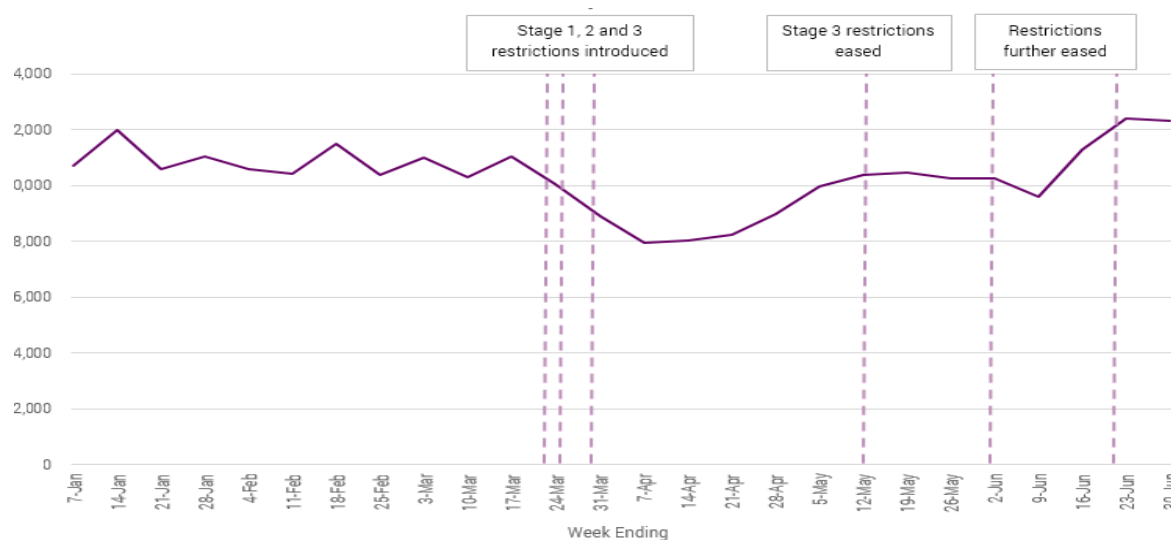
Compared to the 12-month period ending June 2019, during the 12 months ending June 2020, there was an increase of 6% in the volume of offences recorded by Victoria Police. Figure 2 below shows the number of recorded offences, by month, for 2019 and 2020 (including 6,062 breach of COVID-19 restriction offences recorded from March to June 2020). As shown in Figure 2, a drop in offences was observed in April 2020 (n=36,333) and April 2020 recorded the lowest average daily offence count (n=1,211.1) since December 2013 (n=1,205.8). May (n= 44,937) and June 2020 (n=48,810) both increased, recording above their monthly volumes in the previous year. However as noted in the method section above, there was an increased lag in entry of crime reports into their LEAP database following occurrence of crimes, particularly during April 2020 and a subsequent catch-up period in May and June. The trends outlined in Figures 2 and 3 should be interpreted with caution and reflect when police entered offences into the LEAP database, rather than when the offences actually occurred.

Figure 2. Recorded offences by month – January-June 2019 and January-June 2020



The figure below presents the weekly offence volumes from January 2020, with COVID-19 restrictions dates overlaid.

Figure 3. Recorded offences by week – January to June 2020



Offence Type

The type of offences recorded by police between 1 April and 30 June 2019 compared with 2020 is illustrated in Figure 4. As shown, there was a decrease in the number of *Property and deception offences* recorded and increases in the number of *Drug offences* and *Justice procedures offences* recorded. The large increase in *Other offences* is related to the new breach of COVID-19 offences recorded by police during 2020.

Figure 4. Recorded offences by offence division – April to June 2019 and April to June 2020

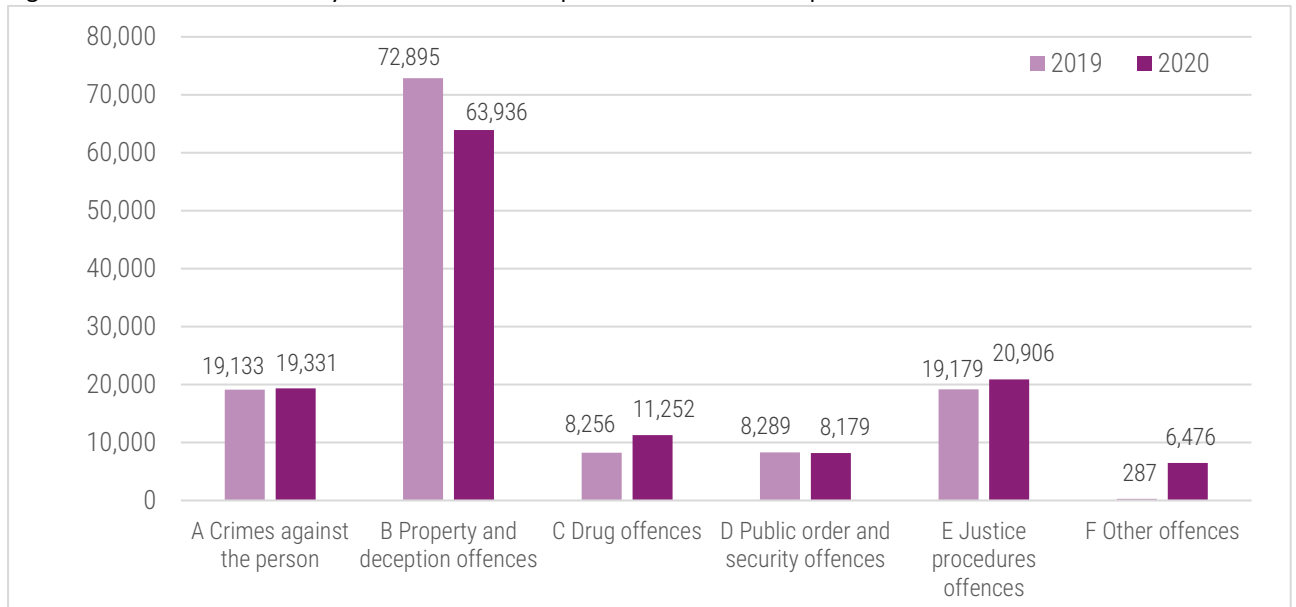
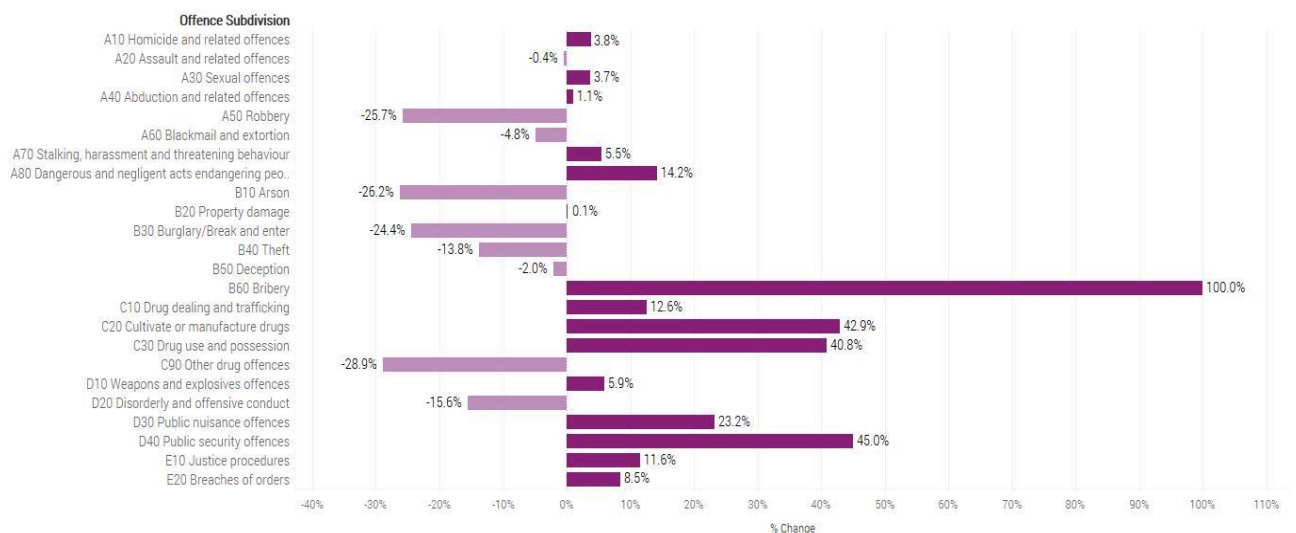


Figure 5 illustrates more detailed analyses of differences in offence types recorded between April and June 2020 and the same period in 2019, though it should be noted that only small volumes of bribery offences are recorded so small fluctuations in numbers can result in large percentage changes.

Figure 5. Percentage change between April-June 2019 and April-June 2020 by offence type



In summary:

- Though there was not a significant difference in the overall number of *Crimes against the person* recorded, there was an 11% increase in *FV common assault*, a 36% increase in *Sexual offences against children*, and a 17% increase in *Assault police, emergency service or other authorised officer*.
- There was a sizable decrease in the number of *Non-FV Serious assaults* recorded (down 19%).
- There was a 12% decrease in *Property and deception offences*, with 72,895 recorded in April to June 2019 compared to 63,936 recorded in the same period 2020. This was largely driven by decreases in *Steal from a motor vehicle* (down 13%), *Steal from a retail store* (down 28%), *Residential non-aggravated burglary* (down 27%).
- Drug offences increased by 36% from April to June 2020 (n=72,895) compared with the same period in 2019 (n=63,936). This was driven largely by an increase in *Drug possession* (up 42%), with cannabis (up 57% from 2,234 to 3,502), methylamphetamine (up 24% from 1,601 to 1,978), prescription drugs (up 36% from 1,003 to 1,365) and GHB (up 119% from 203 to 445), possession increasing in 2020 compared to 2019.
- There was a 23% decrease in *Drunk and disorderly in public* offences, though this may reflect the continuation of a pre-existing decreasing trend in this offence category. Overall, *Public order and security offences* remained stable.
- *Justice procedures offences* increased by 9% from April to June 2019 (n=19,179) to the same period in 2020 (n=20,906). The largest increase in this category was for *Breach family violence order*, which increased by 17%.

Location Type

Table 2 shows the proportion of offences recorded by location type for the first six months of 2020. There was a small increase in the proportion of offences recorded in residential location types between April and June 2020.

Table 2. Recorded offences by location division – January to June 2020

Location	Recorded Offences						% of Total					
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Residential	21,683	18,846	19,879	17,222	19,798	22,280	44%	42%	44%	47%	44%	46%
Community	13,845	13,233	13,289	11,419	15,090	14,311	28%	30%	29%	31%	34%	29%
Other	10,970	10,434	10,020	6,482	8,109	9,427	22%	23%	22%	18%	18%	19%
Unknown	2,332	1,921	1,995	1,210	1,940	2,792	5%	4%	4%	3%	4%	6%
Grand Total	48,830	44,434	45,183	36,333	44,937	48,810	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

As presented in Table 2, the proportion of offences recorded in a Residential location saw a slight increase in April 2020. Within this division the location type "Dwelling-private" continues to record most of the volume.

Within Community locations, the largest increase in volume occurred for street/footpath locations, increasing 32% (or 6,526 offences) from April to June 2019 to April to June 2020. There was a decrease in offences occurring in justice locations during the COVID-19 period, with a drop of 23% from April to June 2019 (n=4,365) compared to 2020 (n=3,369). This can be attributed primarily to decreases in offences occurring at courts and police stations. A similar trend was observed in public transport locations, which decreased 32% overall, largely due to decreases in offences occurring at train stations (down 28% or 561 offences).

The 'other' location division was the only division to record a decrease between April to June 2019 and April to June 2020. This decrease resulted from drops in the number of offences recorded at retail locations (down 19% to 3,727)

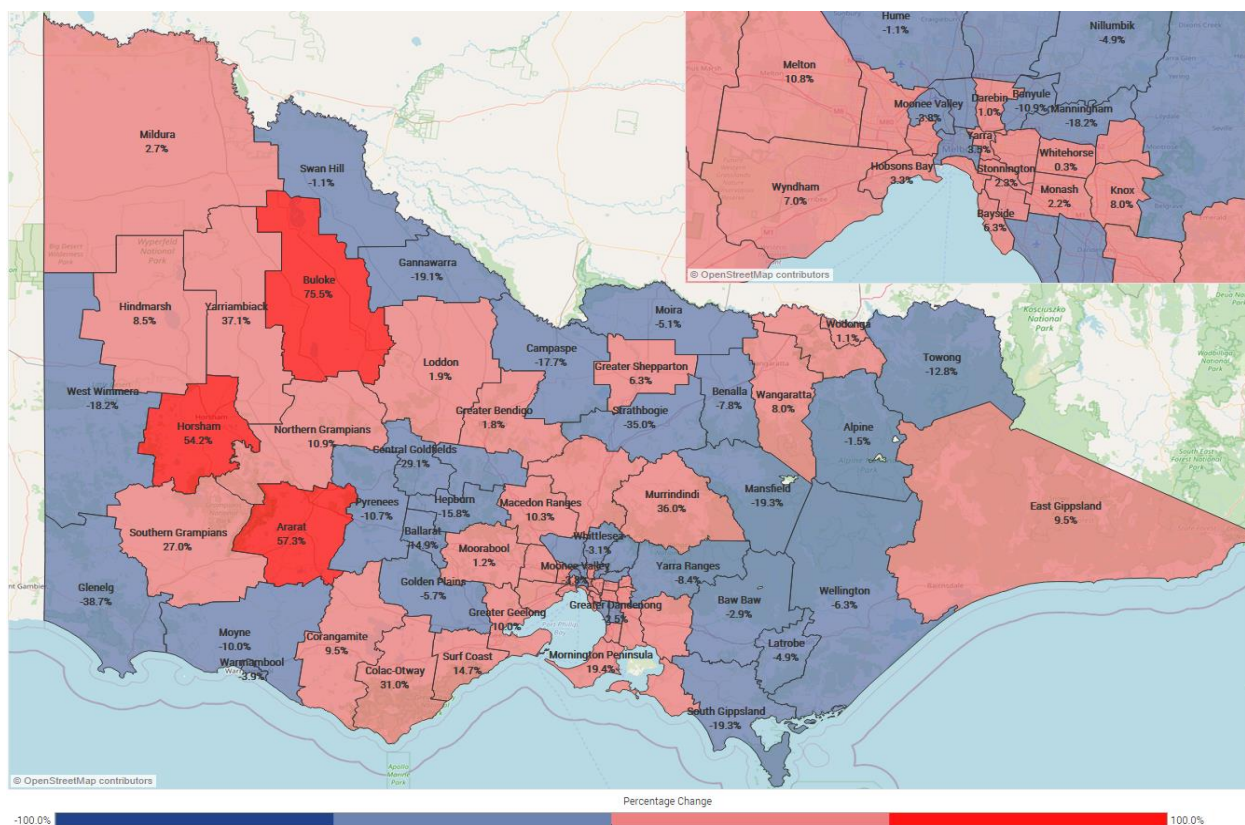
and recreational locations (down 56% to 2,135). This is in line with decreases in the number of *Steal from a retail store* offences recorded by police during this period. Within recreational location types, a large decrease in the number of offences occurring in licensed premises was observed (down 59% to 846 in 2020). Compared to 2019, the number of *Assault* offences that occurred at supermarket locations increased by 68% between April and June 2020 (from 101 in 2019 to 170 in 2020).

Overall, the changes in volume by location type are in line with COVID-19 restrictions and closures relating to specific types of locations.

Geographic Location

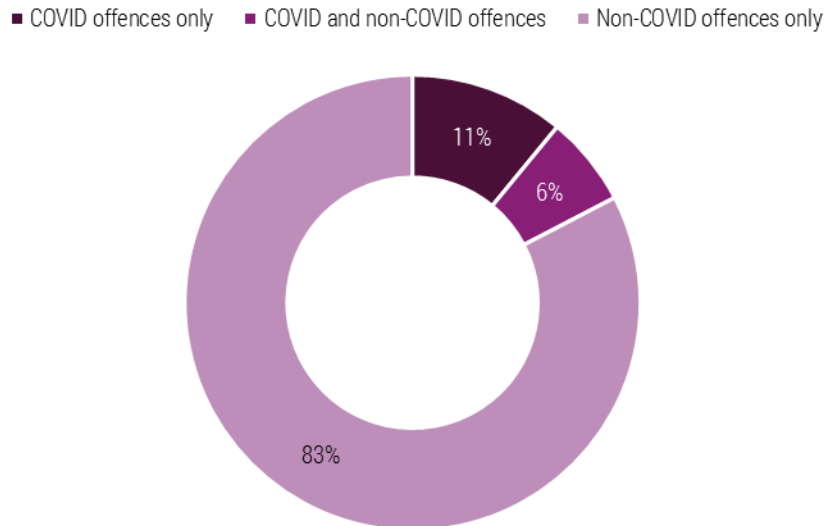
Figure 6 below shows the percentage change between the number of offences recorded in April to June 2019 compared with April to June 2020, by the Local Government Area where these offences occurred. Decreases in the number of offences recorded are highlighted in blue, and increases in red. As shown, there were large increases in the number of offences recorded for some regional areas including Buloke, Ararat and Horsham. However, it should be noted that in areas with small populations and low offence rates, small fluctuations can result in large percentage changes.

Figure 6. Percentage change between April-June 2019 and April-June 2020 by local government area



(n=3,446) were only processed for offences related to breaching COVID-19 restrictions, and 6% (n=2,016) for both COVID breach and non-COVID breach offences.

Figure 7. Offence types recorded for unique offenders, April to June 2020



This section analyses offenders processed for non-COVID offences to examine any changes in 'ordinary' offender profiles between 2019 and 2020. This analysis excludes businesses recorded as offenders and the 3,446 offenders who were processed only for COVID-related offences, who are analysed further in the specific section on breach of COVID-19 restriction offences below.

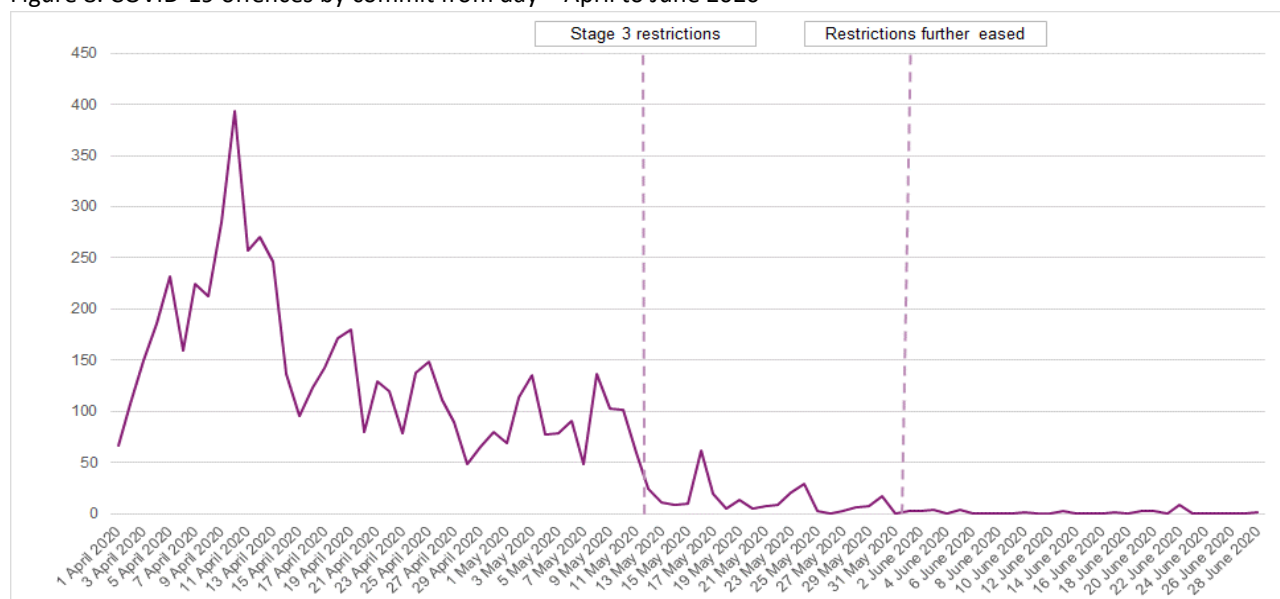
There were 28,005 unique offenders processed for non-COVID offences between 1 April to 30 June 2020, up from 27,003 in the same period in 2019. A t-test was performed to compare offenders' age (at processing date) across the two populations. The test showed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in offenders' mean age between the 2019 and 2020 populations. Offenders processed in 2020 were slightly older than those processed in 2019: the mean offender age in 2020 was 33.9, up from 33.5 in 2019. Chi-square tests were used to compare demographic characteristics of offenders across the two populations to determine whether offenders processed in 2020 were statistically more likely to have particular characteristics. However, there were no statistically significant differences in offender sex, country of birth or Aboriginal status during this period between 2019 and 2020. Further, there were only minor differences in the rate of offending per person between the years. Offenders processed between 1 April and 30 June 2020 were processed for an average (mean) of 3.7 offences per person, slightly down from 3.8 offences per person in the same period in 2019.

3.3 Breach of COVID-19 restrictions offences and offenders

Offences

Between March and June 2020, police recorded 6,062 breach of COVID-19 restriction offences. Figure 8 below shows the distribution of the COVID-19 offences by commit from day. A spike in volume is observed on 10 April (n=394), which was the Good Friday public holiday. The number of COVID-19 offences trails off in May, likely as a result of the gradual easing of restrictions.

Figure 8. COVID-19 offences by commit from day – April to June 2020



The breakdown of COVID-19 offences by time in Table 3 shows that the highest proportion of offences were committed between midnight and 6am, while the lowest proportion were committed between the morning hours of 6am to midday. Note that during the analysis period, the curfew was not yet in place.

Table 3. COVID-19 offences recorded by commit from time

Commit from Time	Number	%
12am – 5:59am	1,911	31.5
6am – 11:59am	673	11.1
12pm – 5:59pm	1,662	27.4
6pm – 11:59pm	1,772	29.2
Total offences*	6,062	100.0

* Commit from time is the earliest possible time the offence may have occurred as recorded by Victoria Police. Total includes offences with a commit from time of 00:01 and commit to time of 23:59, however they are not assigned to a time band as the time of the offence cannot be accurately determined.

As presented in Table 4 below, 58% of all COVID-19 offences (n=3,532) were recorded on a “Street/footpath” location type.

Table 4. COVID-19 offences recorded by location group

Location Group	Number	%
Street/Lane/Footpath	3,532	58.3
House	554	9.1
Private Car	284	4.7

Location Group	Number	%
Flat/Unit/Apartment	273	4.5
Parkland/Reserve	196	3.2
Carpark (Single Level)	149	2.5
All other location types	1,074	17.7
Total offences*	6,062	100.0

* Includes offences where location type is recorded as unknown or missing.

The top five Local Government Areas for COVID-19 related offences, by volume, were:

1. Melbourne (n=662)
2. Greater Dandenong (n=343)
3. Yarra (n=314)
4. Frankston (n=306)
5. Casey (n=267).

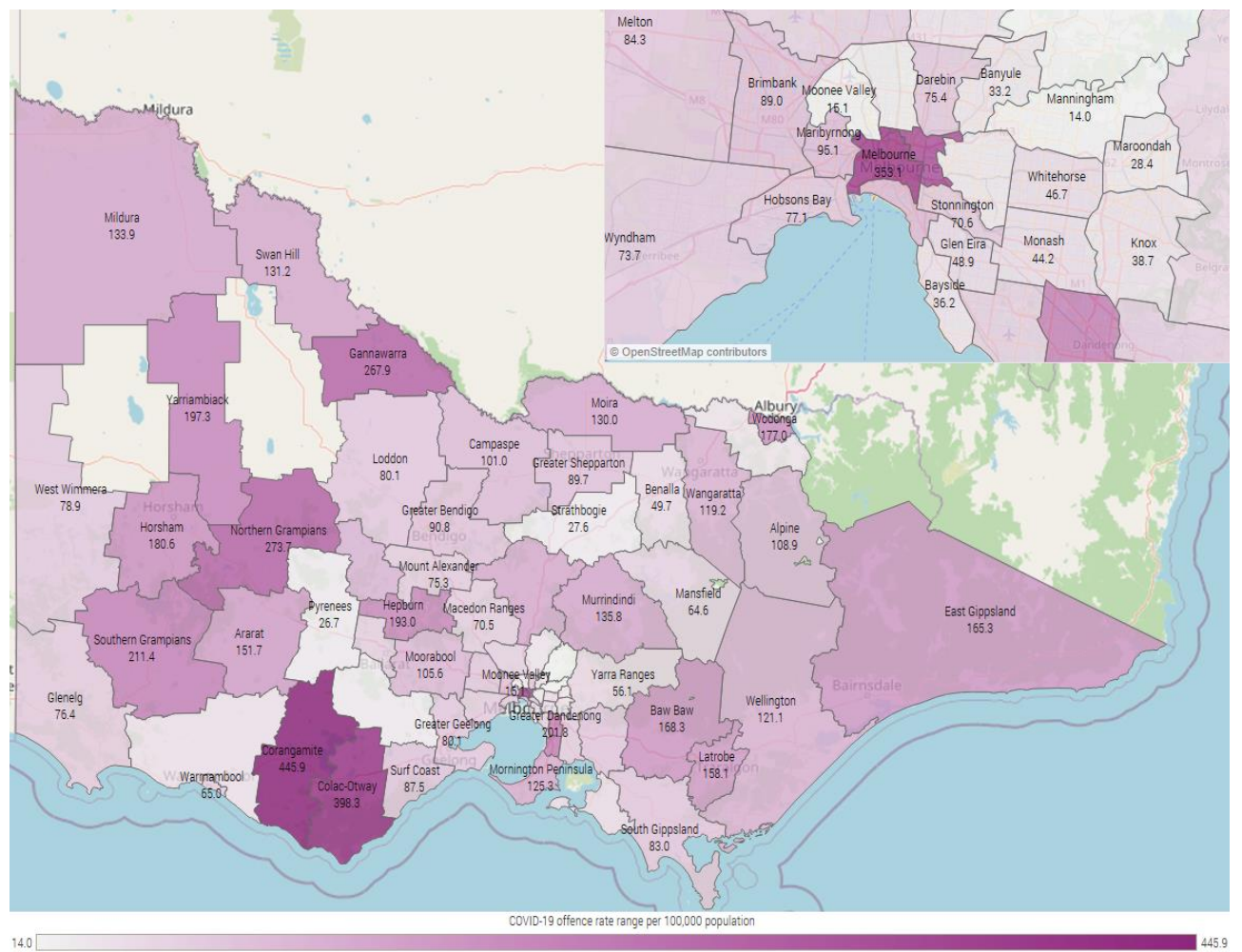
The top five Local Government Areas for COVID related offences, by rate per 100,000 population, were:

1. Corangamite (n=445.9 per 100,000)
2. Colac-Otway (n=398.3 per 100,000)
3. Melbourne (n=353.1 per 100,000)
4. Yarra (n=304.4 per 100,000)
5. Northern Grampians (n=273.7 per 100,000).

Corangamite recorded the highest rate per 100,000 population of COVID-19 offences, however the number of offences recorded was relatively low (n=71). Of the 71 offences, 24 were committed on the 16th of May. Colac-Otway had a total of 86 COVID-19 offences recorded, with 12 of these offences recorded on the 10th of April alone (Good Friday). The top three days for COVID-19 offences within this LGA were weekend or public holiday days.

Figure 9 below shows COVID-19 offences rates per 100,000 population by LGA, with darker shades representing a higher rate of offences.

Figure 9. COVID-19 offence rate per 100,000 by local government area

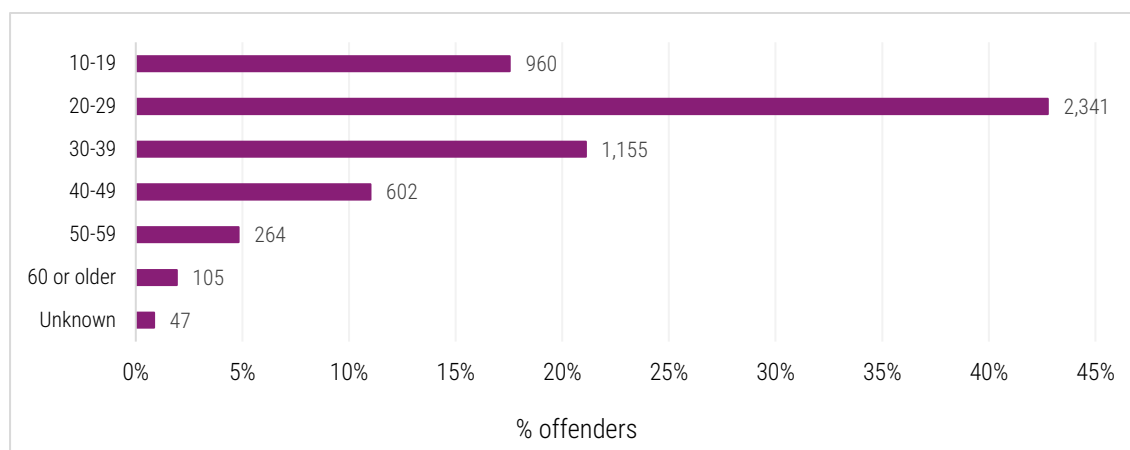


Offenders

There were 5,483 unique offenders recorded for breaching COVID-19 restrictions between March and June 2020. This figure includes nine businesses and 5,474 individual people. Each of the nine businesses received a penalty infringement notice (fine) from police and no business was recorded for more than one breach offence. The remainder of the analysis on breach of COVID-19 restriction offenders in this section excludes these nine businesses.

One in four offenders recorded for breaching COVID-19 restrictions were female (n=1,346), while three-quarters were male (n=4,128). The average age of offenders was 29.5 years old. Figure 10 shows the age of offenders at the time of their first breach of COVID-19 restriction offence. More than four out of 10 offenders were aged in their 20s (43%), while 21% were aged in their 30s.

Figure 10. Offender age at first breach of COVID-19 restriction offence



As shown in Table 5, almost all breach of COVID-19 restriction offences were dealt with by way of a penalty infringement notice (fine) (96%). A small number of offenders were charged (n=72), however almost all of these offenders were also processed by police for another type of offence on the same date (n=70). Note this is the police action taken for an offender’s first breach of COVID-19 restriction offence, if they were recorded for more than one.

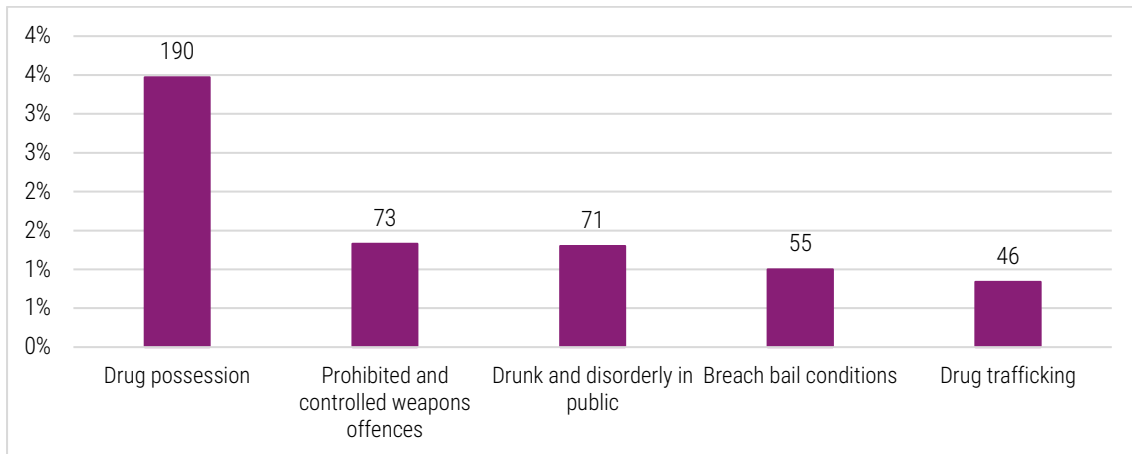
Table 5. Police action taken for breach of COVID-19 restriction offences

Police action taken	Number	%
Penalty infringement notice (fine)	5,279	96.4
Not a penalty infringement notice	195	3.6
<i>Charges laid</i>	72	1.3
<i>Official warning</i>	63	1.2
<i>All other outcomes¹</i>	60	1.1
Total offenders	5,474	100.0

¹ Includes police actions such as intent to summons and penalty infringement notices that were not authorised to proceed

Most offenders recorded for breaching COVID-19 restrictions were not processed by police for any other offences on the same date. However, as shown in Figure 11, 14% of offenders were concurrently processed by police for another type of offence. The most commonly recorded offence types fell within the CSA Offence Groups of *Drug possession* (n=190; 3.5%), *Prohibited and controlled weapons offences* (n=73; 1.3%), *Drunk and disorderly in public* (n=71; 1.3%) and *Breach bail conditions* (n=55; 1.0%). Note this relates to an offender’s first breach of COVID-19 offence, if they were recorded for more than one.

Figure 11. Proportion of breach of COVID-19 restriction offenders concurrently processed by police for other offence types



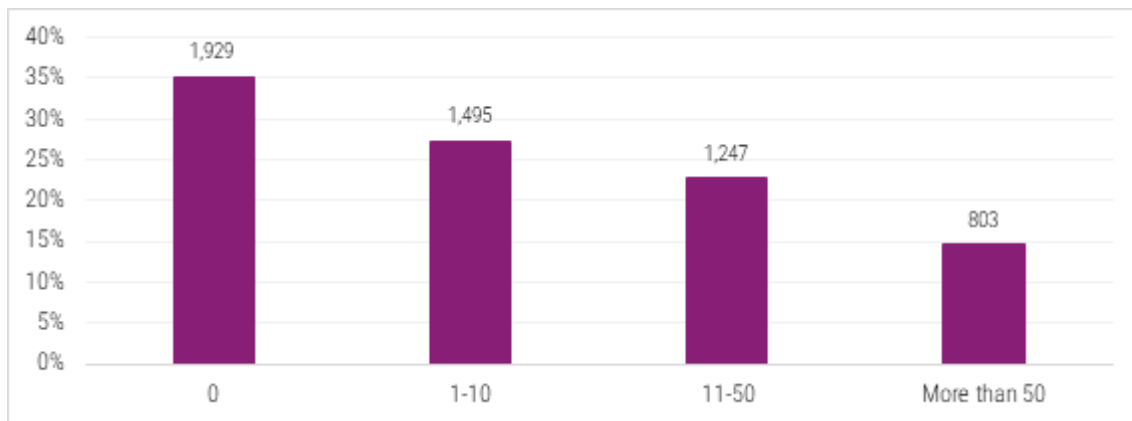
The number of breach of COVID-19 restriction offences that each offender was recorded for between March and June 2020 is shown in Table 6. Nine out of 10 offenders were only recorded for one offence, however 7% were recorded for two offences, while 2% of offenders were recorded between three and five offences. There were 17 individuals who were recorded for six or more breach of COVID-19 restriction offences.

Table 6. Number of breach of COVID-19 restriction offences per unique offender

Number breach of COVID-19 restriction offences	Number	%
1	4,952	90.5
2	400	7.3
3-5	105	1.9
6 or more	17	0.3
Total offenders	5,474	100.0

The recorded criminal history of each breach of COVID-19 restriction offender was determined, based on whether alleged offenders had previously been recorded as an offender in CSA data holdings (back to July 2004). More than one in three (35%) breach of COVID-19 restriction offenders were first-time offenders (n=1,929), not previously recorded by police for any offences since July 2004. However, one in seven offenders had an extensive prior criminal history and had been recorded by police for more than 50 criminal offences prior to their COVID-19 offence (15%).

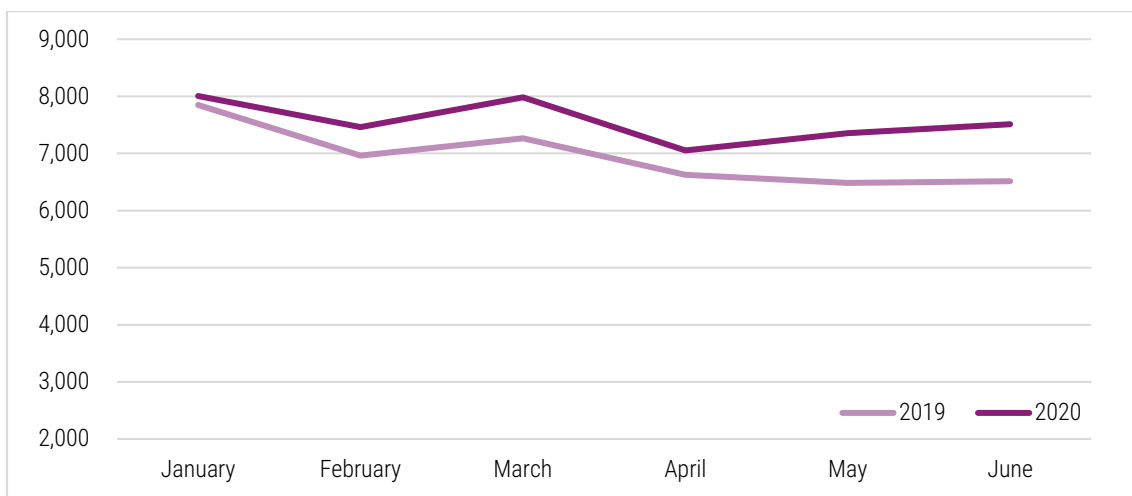
Figure 12. Number of offences each offender recorded for prior to first breach of COVID-19 restriction offence



3.4 Family Violence

The monthly number of family violence incidents recorded by police typically follows a seasonal pattern: the highest number of incidents are usually recorded in the summer months of December and January, while lower numbers are typically recorded during the colder months of May-July. The monthly number of family violence incidents was higher in every month during 2020 than during 2019. However, in June 2020 the number of incidents was 15% higher than in June 2019, while for February 2020, it was only 7% higher than in February 2019.

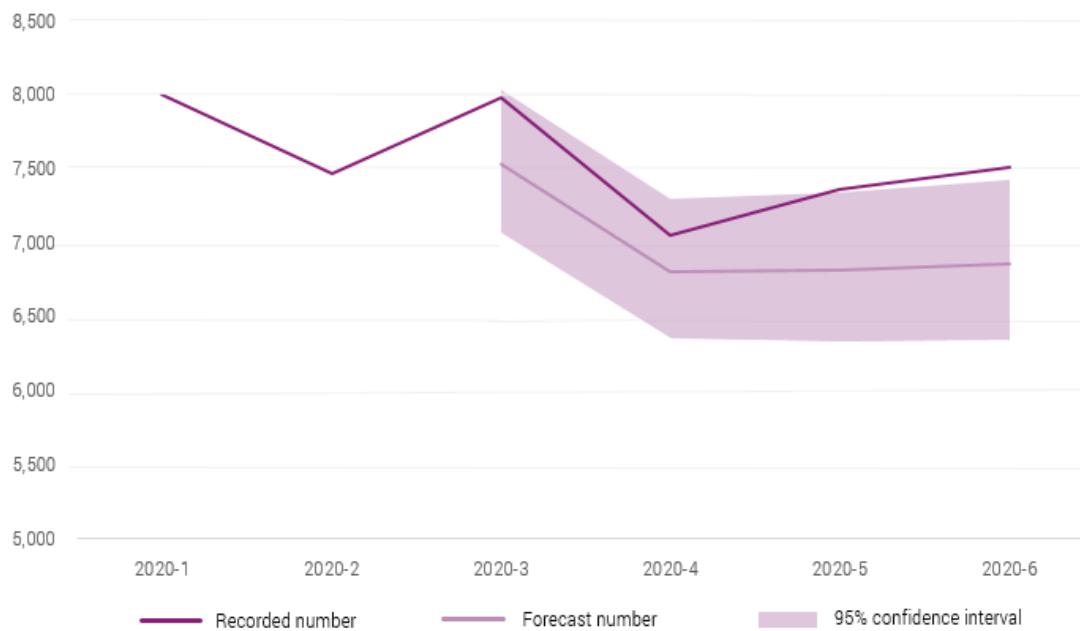
Figure 13. Monthly number of family violence incidents recorded by police



A forecasting model was used to predict the number of family violence incidents expected over the period of the Victorian Government COVID-19 restrictions. This model uses historical data to account for the seasonality of recorded family violence incident numbers, as well as the overall trends seen over time. Although Stage One restrictions began in Victoria on 23 March 2020, many other changes occurred in Victoria during March, for example many people began working from home. To account for the potential impact of COVID-19 restrictions and other changes over this period, the number of monthly family violence incidents was forecast from March until June 2020.

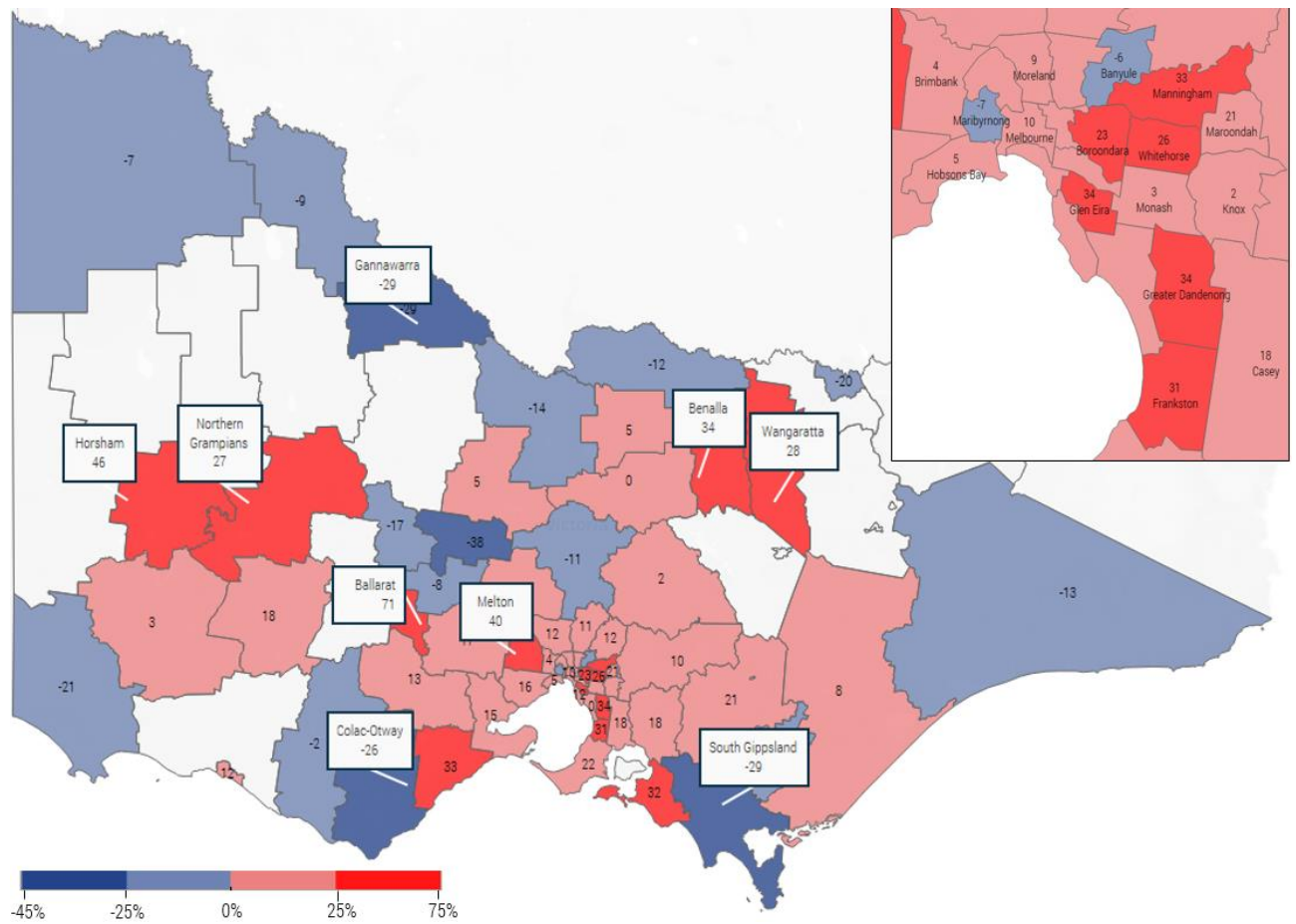
As shown in Figure 14, the number of family violence incidents recorded were largely consistent with the predictions from the forecast model. However, while March and April were consistent with the forecast model, the months of May and June 2020 were both slightly higher than expected, falling outside the upper 95% confidence interval limits.

Figure 14. Forecasted and recorded monthly number of family violence incidents in Victoria



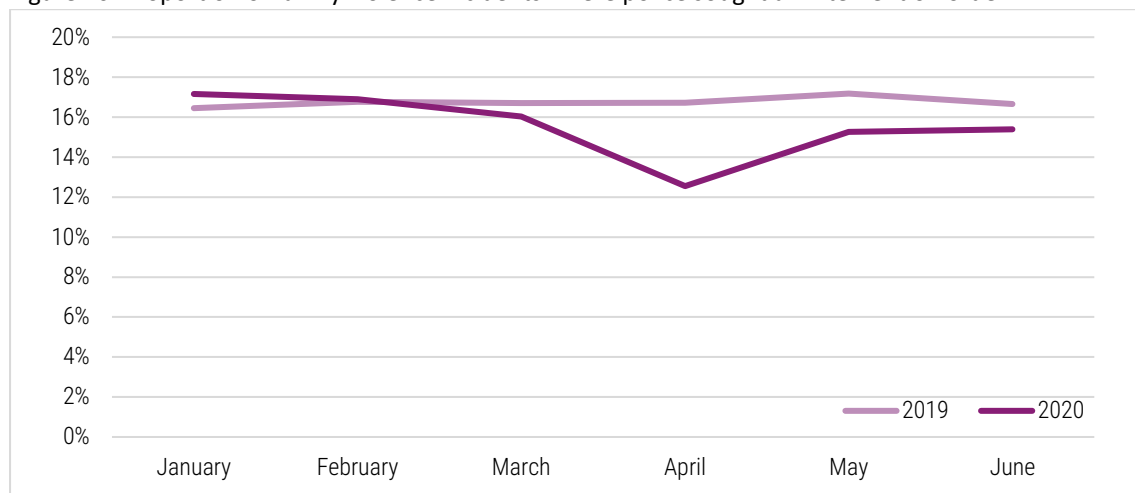
Examining the percentage change between the number of family incidents recorded between April and June 2019 and the same period in 2020 by Local Government Area (LGA) highlights changes at a local level. Figure 15 shows the proportional change between April and June 2019 and 2020, with decreases highlighted in blue and increases highlighted in red. The LGAs with the highest proportional increases were Ballarat (71%), Horsham (46%) and Melton (40%), while those that experienced the largest decreases were Mount Alexander (-38%), South Gippsland (-29%) and Gannawarra (-29%). Note this analysis excludes any LGA with fewer than 80 family incidents recorded in total during the two three-month periods (displayed as white on the map below), due to issues associated with identifying reliable trends where numbers are small.

Figure 15. Percentage change in number of family violence incidents recorded by police between April-June 2019 and April-June 2020



The proportion of family violence incidents where police indicated on an L17 family incident report they would seek an intervention order was determined (Figure 16). In 2020, the proportion declined from 31% in February to 27% in April. The decline over this period was related to a decrease in the proportion of incidents where police indicated they would seek an intervention order by applying directly to the court via application and summons or warrant (17% to 13%) while the proportion initiated by police issuing a family violence safety notice remained steady (14% to 15%).

Figure 16. Proportion of family violence incidents where police sought an intervention order

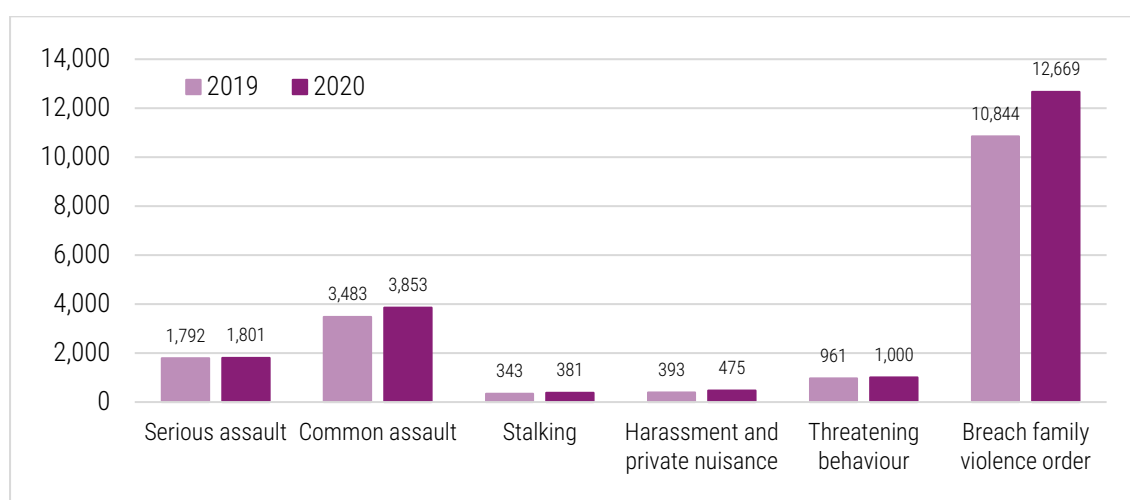


The numbers of family violence-related offences recorded during April-June 2019 were compared to the number recorded during April-June 2020 across the following categories of offences:

- Serious and common assault
- Stalking
- Harassment and private nuisance
- Threatening behaviour
- Breach family violence order

Breach of family violence order offences increased by the largest amount in terms of raw numbers, increasing by 1,825 offences (17%) (Figure 17), and continuing an existing increasing trend in these types of breaches. The category of offences to show the largest proportional change between 2019 and 2020 was *Harassment and private nuisance*, which increased by 21%.

Figure 17. Number of family violence related offences, April-June 2019 and April-June 2020



6. Discussion

It has been difficult to determine the monthly impacts on crime trends of COVID-19 and associated restrictions during the period from April to June 2020. The analyses presented in this paper show that there were differences in the types of offences recorded by police throughout this time compared with 2019 that are likely related to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions put in place to limit peoples' movements. In particular, and in line with studies from other jurisdictions (Kim and Leung, 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020), there was a decrease in the number of property offences recorded. The 28% decrease in thefts from retail stores is potentially related to fewer people visiting stores during Victoria's lockdown periods and/or more stores being closed. Reductions in motor vehicle thefts and residential non-aggravated burglaries likely result from more people being at their houses throughout this time, increasing guardianship and deterring would-be offenders.

Drug possession offences increased by 42%, largely due to increases in cannabis possession, but also contributed to by increases in illegal possession of prescription drugs, GHB and methylamphetamine. Similarly, the UK has observed an increase in offences recorded for drug possession, which they attribute to increases in proactive policing during the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Between March and June 2020, 6,062 breaches of COVID-19 restriction offences were recorded by police. The number of offences spiked on the Good Friday public holiday and trailed off in May as restrictions were eased. Colac-Otway had a high rate of offences recorded, particularly on the Good Friday public holiday but also on weekends in general, potentially suggesting that the influx of additional visitors to holiday areas can drive an associated increase in breaches of restrictions. Offences were most likely to be recorded between midnight and 6am, even though curfew-based restrictions were not yet in place. COVID-19 breach offences were most likely to occur in public locations: less than one in five were recorded in residential locations, while almost two thirds were recorded on the street/lane/footpath. Only 35% of those individuals recorded for a breach of a COVID-19 offence were identified as 'first-time offenders' in CSA data holdings, indicating that the majority of those who are identified by police as breaching restrictions are existing offenders.

Overall volumes of family violence incidents recorded by police have been higher over the past 12 months than they were over the 12 months prior to that. Family violence incident volumes have been increasing in recent years, nevertheless, this study identified that there were significantly higher than expected volumes of family violence incidents recorded in May and June 2020. Geographically, large increases in family violence incidents were identified between April to June 2019 and the same period in 2020 in some regional areas, including Ballarat (71% increase), Horsham (46% increase) and the metropolitan area of Melton (40% increase). The observed increases may be associated with increased police detection of incidents and breaches of family violence orders associated with Operation Ribbon. However, it is paramount that these rates continue to be monitored to ensure victim safety throughout this potentially high-risk period, and that other data sources relating to family violence rates are triangulated to determine whether the increases observed here relate to increased incidence or increased detection and recording by police.

Monitoring the continuing impact of the pandemic on other types of crime is also important as this can have flow-on effects for demands on police, policing strategies and the broader criminal justice system. With the re-introduction of Stage 3 COVID-19 restrictions at the beginning of July and the introduction of Stage 4 restrictions in early August, we are also likely to see increases in COVID-19 breach offences and offenders in future analyses and further disruption to usual crime trends.

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