

# Police-reported crime incidents down during the early months of the pandemic, while domestic disturbance calls increase

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During the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic, 17 police services in Canada reported a 16% decrease in selected criminal incidents, compared with the same period the year before. In contrast, the number of calls for service increased 7% (**correction**) during the early months of the pandemic, particularly wellness checks by these police services and calls to attend domestic disturbances.

Since the start of the pandemic, Statistics Canada has committed to measuring the impacts of COVID-19 on the daily lives of Canadians. Examining levels of crime is an important part of understanding the well-being of individuals and communities during this difficult time. While many countries reported a decline in police-reported crime during the stringent lockdown measures put in place early in the pandemic, many organizations in Canada and internationally raised concerns about increases in domestic violence under these circumstances. As part of a web panel survey conducted in April, Statistics Canada asked Canadians how concerned they were about different situations related to COVID-19. The release [Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians: First results from crowdsourcing](#) indicates that 10% of women and 6% of men reported that they were concerned about the possibility of violence in the home.

## Decrease in selected police-reported criminal incidents during the first four months of the pandemic

A special monthly data collection from 17 police services to provide insight into police-reported crime during the pandemic shows fewer criminal incidents for select offences during the first four months of the pandemic compared with the year before. Collectively, the police services that participated in the collection of monthly statistics for March to June 2020 reported a decrease in each of the 13 crime types surveyed, amounting to a 16% decrease overall. While the 17 police services represent some of the largest in Canada (for example, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Ontario Provincial Police, the Toronto Police Service and the Vancouver Police Department) serving approximately 59% of the country's population, and the criminal offences surveyed include several serious offence types (for example, sexual assaults, assaults, robbery, break and enter), caution should be exercised when interpreting the findings from this data collection activity as these results are not representative of overall police-reported crime in Canada (see the note to readers for further explanation of the police services and crime types included).

## Fewer sexual assaults, assaults and property crimes reported to the police services

During the early months of the pandemic, police services in this study saw a 27% (**correction**) decrease in reported sexual assaults, including those committed by non-family members (-27%) (**correction**) and family members (-18%) compared with the same period the year before. The number of reported assaults also declined, including those committed by non-family (-12%) and, to a lesser extent, by family members (-4%). Victimization surveys have shown that rates of reporting to the police are lower for sexual assaults and spousal violence than for other types of crimes. For those experiencing violence, especially within the home, previous releases have shown that accessing help during the pandemic may be more difficult because of restricted contact with networks and sources of support both formal (schools, counsellors, victim services) and informal (family and friends). For more information, please see [The COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on Canadian victim services](#).

## Fewer reported incidents of property crimes and impaired driving during early months of COVID-19

With cities and communities shut down and individuals sheltering in their homes, it is perhaps not surprising that police reported a drop in some of the more common types of property crime. Compared with the same period in 2019, police services in this study reported notable decreases from March to June 2020 in the number of



incidents of shoplifting (-46%), residential breaking and entering (-22%) and motor vehicle theft (-15%). Although businesses were largely closed and many were unattended, police in the study still reported 6% fewer non-residential break and enters during the early months of the pandemic. Robbery, which is theft with violence or the threat of violence, also saw a notable decrease (-20%).

While there were some concerns regarding an increase in impaired driving during the early days of the pandemic, police services in this study reported 14% fewer incidents than for the same period in the previous year. This may be due to legislated closures resulting in fewer people on the roads and frequenting restaurants and bars. Another factor may be less pro-active enforcement by police during a time when some police services faced challenges in the availability of officers, given pandemic-related absences.

Results from a previous release, [Canadians' perceptions of personal safety since COVID-19](#), are consistent with these recent data from police. Among 43,000 persons who participated in a crowdsourcing survey on perceptions of safety from May 12 to 25, 50% felt the level of crime in their neighbourhood had remained about the same since the start of the pandemic, 15% felt that crime had decreased and 11% felt it had increased. About one-quarter did not know if crime in their neighbourhood had changed.

### **Calls for service to police up during the early months of the pandemic**

Police perform many duties, including responding to events that are directly related to public safety and well-being, even if they are not criminal in nature. These events are often referred to by police as calls for service. From March to June 2020, there was an increase in calls for service among the police services included in this study. Most notably, police services that were able to report data on calls for service responded to more calls related to general wellbeing (welfare) checks (+12%), domestic disturbances (+12%) and mental health-related such as a person in an emotional crisis (+11%). Calls to police classified as domestic disturbances or domestic disputes can involve anything from a verbal quarrel to reports of violence at a residence.

An increase in wellbeing checks and reports of domestic disturbances demonstrates the risks associated with social isolation and perhaps the concern of family, friends and neighbours. As reported in the release, [Canadians' perceptions of personal safety since COVID-19](#), almost 8 in 10 participants in a crowdsourcing survey felt that it was very or somewhat likely that neighbours would call the police if they heard or witnessed what seemed like violence in the home—a sign of social cohesion during difficult times.

A rise in mental health related calls during the pandemic may also be expected during a pandemic. Results from crowdsourcing and probabilistic web panels provide evidence of the negative impact the pandemic has had on individuals' mental health, particularly with the physical distancing, social isolation and financial losses felt by many. For more information, please see [Canadians' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

### **Police involved in enforcing measures related to managing the pandemic**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, police—along with by-law and public health officers—have been responsible for enforcing legislation related to containing the pandemic. These have included municipal by-laws, provincial and territorial emergency health acts and the federal *Quarantine Act*. Typically, local police do not enforce by-laws. Also, the enforcement of provincial or territorial emergency health acts is shared with public health officers. As such, data on these enforcements are a reflection of police involvement and not necessarily the number of occurrences.

The 15 police services that provided data on the enforcement of provincial / territorial pandemic-related legislation reported involvement in a total of 11,602 infractions against these acts. The highest level of occurrences was reported in April, which accounted for 41% of police involvements in enforcements from March to May (month-to-month comparisons are not made with June due to missing data).

**Table 1**  
**Selected police-reported crime and calls for service during the COVID-19 pandemic, March to June 2020 (correction)**

	March to June 2019	March to June 2020	Difference from 2019	
	number	number	number	percent change
<b>Selected violations and calls for service<sup>1,2</sup></b>				
<b>Selected violations</b>				
<b>Total criminal incidents</b>	<b>242,392</b>	<b>202,639</b>	<b>-39,753</b>	<b>-16.4</b>
Total assaults (levels 1, 2, 3)	55,769	49,405	-6,364	-11.4
Assaults by non-family (levels 1, 2, 3)	32,681	28,702	-3,979	-12.2
Assaults by family (levels 1, 2, 3)	13,679	13,084	-595	-4.3
Assaults where relationship type is unknown	9,409	7,619	-1,790	-19.0
Total sexual assaults (levels 1, 2, 3)	6,249	4,586	-1,663	-26.6
Sexual assaults by non-family (levels 1, 2, 3)	3,859	2,828	-1,031	-26.7
Sexual assaults by family (levels 1, 2, 3)	1,040	856	-184	-17.7
Sexual assaults where relationship type is unknown	1,350	902	-448	-33.2
Uttering threats	11,677	10,465	-1,212	-10.4
Uttering threats by non-family	7,033	6,179	-854	-12.1
Uttering threats by family	1,476	1,522	46	3.1
Uttering threats where relationship type is unknown	3,168	2,764	-404	-12.8
Assault against peace or public officer (level 1)	2,002	1,891	-111	-5.5
Total robbery	4,442	3,543	-899	-20.2
Dangerous operation, causing death or bodily harm	130	99	-31	-23.8
Impaired driving, causing death or bodily harm	147	100	-47	-32.0
Total breaking and entering <sup>3</sup>	34,742	30,249	-4,493	-12.9
Breaking and entering, non-residential	19,093	18,010	-1,083	-5.7
Breaking and entering, residential	15,353	11,992	-3,361	-21.9
Motor vehicle theft	18,043	15,303	-2,740	-15.2
Shoplifting	30,931	16,696	-14,235	-46.0
Fraud / identity theft / identity fraud	33,146	31,029	-2,117	-6.4
Fail to comply with order	25,646	22,564	-3,082	-12.0
Impaired driving, operating while impaired	19,468	16,709	-2,759	-14.2
<b>Provincial/territorial acts related to COVID-19</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>11,602</b>	<b>...</b>	<b>...</b>
<b>Selected calls for service<sup>2,4</sup></b>				
<b>Total calls for service (correction)</b>	<b>85,997</b>	<b>92,218</b>	<b>6,221</b>	<b>7.2</b>
Domestic disturbances / disputes	34,632	38,665	4,033	11.6
Mental Health Act apprehension	10,529	10,822	293	2.8
Mental health - other	13,759	15,223	1,464	10.6
Suicide / attempted suicide	10,744	9,734	-1,010	-9.4
Overdose <sup>5</sup> (correction)	2,227	1,982	-245	-11.0
Child welfare check	186	219	33	17.7
Check welfare - general (correction)	13,711	15,294	1,583	11.5
Child custody matter - domestic (correction)	209	279	70	33.5

... not applicable

- Includes data reported by a sample of 17 police services across Canada. At time of this report, the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and Waterloo Regional Police Service were unable to provide a submission for the month of June.
- Calls for service (CFS) are defined as calls received by police services that are citizen-generated or officer initiated, and required the tasking of police resources (e.g., a call to a 9-1-1 emergency line that resulted in the dispatch of an officer). Calls for service information was reported by 14 police services. The OPP and Waterloo Regional Police Service provided CFS data for March to May 2020.
- Total incidents of breaking and entering does not equal the sum of incidents of breaking and entering reported by residential and non-residential location type, as some police services were unable to report the location type for all cases.
- Some police services who provided CFS information overall were not able to report for every call type. In addition, police services in some cases were unable to separate the call types as presented, and provided counts that combine one or more call type together. For example, calls for domestic disputes may include child welfare situations, and calls for other mental health may include some Mental Health Act apprehensions. Interpret calls for service data with caution.
- Overdose counts do not reflect all overdose incidents occurring within police service boundaries as response is frequently by paramedics. Where police do not attend, the occurrence will not appear in police records.

**Source(s):** Special police-reported crime statistics - Special COVID-19 report to Statistics Canada.

### Note to readers

The Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics (CCJCSS) is conducting a special survey collection from a sample of police services across Canada measuring the impact of COVID-19 on selected types of crimes and calls for service. In addition, counts of police responses to infractions against municipal by-laws or provincial / territorial acts related to the containment of COVID-19 pandemic were requested. This initial report on this special collection includes findings for the reporting period of March to June 2020, in comparison with the previous year. Data will continue to be collected monthly until December 2020 and reported regularly.

For more information about this program, please see [Uniform Crime Reporting Survey](#).

For this reference period of March to June, 17 police services provided data on a voluntary basis. These include: Calgary Police Service, Edmonton Police Service, Halton Regional Police Service, Kennebecasis Regional Police Force, London Police Service, Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), Ottawa Police Service, Regina Police Service, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, Saskatoon Police Service, Toronto Police Service, Vancouver Police Department, Victoria Police Department, Waterloo Regional Police Service, Winnipeg Police Service, and York Regional Police.

Police services that responded to this survey serve approximately 59% of the Canadian population. The RCMP, Edmonton Police Service and Winnipeg Police Service were unable to provide calls for service data, therefore police services providing these data serve 32% of the Canadian population. At the time of this release, the OPP and Waterloo Regional Police Service were unable to provide a submission for the month of June 2020.

Selected crime types include: assaults; sexual assaults; assaults against a peace or public officer; uttering threats; robbery; dangerous operation causing death or bodily harm; impaired driving or impaired driving causing death or bodily harm; breaking and entering; motor vehicle theft; shoplifting; fraud / identity theft / identity fraud; and failure to comply with order.

Calls for service are defined as calls received by police services that are citizen-generated or officer initiated, and required the tasking of police resources (e.g., a call to a 9-1-1 emergency line that resulted in the dispatch of an officer).

### Correction note

On April 22, 2021, data for "Calls for service, overdose"; "Calls for service, child welfare check"; "Calls for service, child custody matter – domestic"; and "Total calls for service" for all reference periods were corrected due to an error in the application of selected response categories.

**Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [3302](#).**

**Available tables: table [35-10-0169-01](#).**

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; [STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca)).