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In Sickness and In Health: Effects of COVID-19 on Felony Crime in Washington County, Arkansas

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**In Sickness and In Health: Effects of COVID-19 on Felony Crime in Washington County,
Arkansas**

by

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Advised by Dr. Kim Petrone

**An Honors Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of
Science in Business Administration in Economics**

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ABSTRACT

This research explores potential connections to the COVID-19 pandemic and felony crime levels, as seen in the categories of business crimes, domestic violence, and theft. The COVID-19 pandemic has rearranged what was previously known about the world, in every aspect of life. From jobs to public life to even government, at every level worldwide there was a fundamental change. Therefore, it stands to reason that crime was also affected by this massive shift in the overall state of being. This research examines how much of an effect there was on crime rates in Washington County, Arkansas by measuring amounts and types of felony violations both before and during the beginning of the pandemic. Then, the data was broken down into set groups based upon felony type and analyzed accordingly.

This research found that while there were increases in both the categories of theft and domestic violence and theft, the overall effect on business related crimes was null. Additionally, it was found that there was an overall decrease in felony violations. Despite backlogs of courts and other potential factors potentially causing this decrease, it is to be concluded that there is a strong connection between felony crime rates and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

Every generation has a catastrophic event that is remembered by each of its members. They all can recall where they were and what they were doing when they realized that their lives would never be the same. Time will tell what the exact moment will be for Generation Z, but the most recent would be the moment when they realized that COVID-19 would change their worlds indefinitely. Almost two years past the declaration of a worldwide pandemic and society is just beginning to study some of the effects of this shock to humanity on everyday life. All aspects of life were affected, including crime. Crime has existed since mankind determined codes of conduct and punishments for when they were violated, and it is something that will last as long as society itself does. "Crime is a highly complex phenomenon that changes across cultures and across time." (*Theories and causes of crime - SCCJR 2016*) But crime is not a one size fits all label and figuring out the cause of criminal activity has been the subject of much research in the sociological field for many years.

There is no exact cause for crime but there are many theories, including a sociological approach. The founding father of sociology, Emile Durkheim, posited anomie, or strain theory, as an explanation for crime. Anomie is "the breakdown of social norms that often accompanies rapid social change." (*Theories and causes of crime - SCCJR 2016*) This theory was further developed by Robert Melton in 1957 to account for American crime and deviance. Melton claimed "that crime occurs when there is a gap between the cultural goals of a society (i.e., material wealth, status) and the structural means to achieve these (i.e., education, employment). This strain between means and goals results in frustration and resentment and encourages some people to use illegitimate or illegal means to secure success." (*Theories and causes of crime - SCCJR 2016*) In essence, strain theory suggests that the cultural values and social structures of society drive individual citizens towards crime in order to achieve the standards set upon them.

What other time in human history has there been such jarring or rapid change in societal structure than the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? Not only was there a new virus that much was still unknown about, but there were closures of businesses, offices, and many government facilities. Working from home became the new norm, but that is only possible for a fraction of jobs. Many who had jobs were suddenly unemployed and had nowhere to turn. Could this sudden change have influenced crime? The purpose of this research is to see what changes – if any – occurred in crime patterns during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done through looking at the type and amount of felony violations that happened due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the community of Washington County, Arkansas. I theorize that I will find increased rates of crime, specifically theft and domestic violence due to the rapid rise in unemployment and increased time spent in the home due to business closures. Additionally, I will be examining some of the effects on businesses due to these changes in crime.

METHODOLOGY

To collect this data, starting parameters had to be decided. The first, of course, would be to decide which location to focus data collection on. The state of Arkansas has public access to felony records through the Arkansas Court Connect website. (*AOC Public Court Connect*) The case file information can be searched by type of violation, court, county, or even person. I decided a single county would streamline the research process further than by state. In deciding which county to focus on, I looked at demographics. According to the Research Division at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Washington County's median household income for 2019 is \$52,158 which is roughly \$3,000 underneath the state's median household income. (*Estimate of*

median household income for Washington County, AR, 2021) (*Real median household income in Arkansas, 2021*) Additional factors for Washington County to be the focus of this research include a more racially diversified population and close to the same levels of education when compared to state population data. (*U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Arkansas*) (*U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Washington County, Arkansas*) Given all the above, I chose to narrow my focus to Washington County, Arkansas.

After deciding location, then the dates to be tested had to be defined. For my research, I selected March 11th, 2020 as the beginning of the pandemic. This is because the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 crisis a pandemic on this date. (*CDC Museum Covid-19 Timeline 2022*) Governor of Arkansas Asa Hutchinson declared a public health emergency for the state on the same day. (*In Re Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020*) After deciding when the pandemic officially started, the next step was to determine which dates to gather felony information from. The year 2019 was chosen as a control to test the pandemic year data. With the vast number of felonies per month, I decided to only investigate three months both pre and during the COVID-19 pandemic, skipping every other month to attempt to account for lockdown orders and releases from in other states. Arkansas has never issued a lockdown or stay at home order over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. (*Arkansas: State-by-State Covid-19 Guidance*) Each “month” was a period of 31 days, so that both the “March 2019” and “March 2020” data ranges from the start date of the pandemic to 31 days after. The same months I collected data from in 2020, I collected the corresponding 2019 data. This is to account for any holiday or seasonal changes or behaviors. As such, the dates researched are as follows:

March 11, 2019 – April 10, 2019
May 1, 2019 – May 31, 2019
July 1, 2019 – July 31, 2019
March 11, 2020 – April 10, 2020
May 1, 2020 – May 31, 2020
July 1, 2020 – July 31, 2020

In the Court Connect website, cases are listed by the case filing date. Therefore, the cases are categorized not by date the crimes occurred on but by the date they were filed.

The next step in the research was to compile the data from the Court Connect website. The case ID, the case filing date, number and type of felony violation, case status, sentence (if applicable), prosecuting attorney(s), and judge presiding over the case were collected for each unique case ID. As I entered data, I created a numerical code for some of the more common crimes seen while collecting data. These were not a complete list of the crimes encountered during collection, but they were the most common in the first month of data collection. These are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

CODE NUMBER	FELONY
1	FAIL TO APPEAR ON FELONY (FTA)
2	POSSESS CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE SCHED I, II METH COCAINE
3	POSSESS CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE SCHED I, II EXCLUDING METH COCAINE
4	POSSESS DRUG PARAPHERNALIA METH COCAINE HEROIN FENTANYL
5	THEFT BY RECEIVING
6	FORGERY
7	AGGRAVATED ASSAULT - FAMILY OR HOUSEHOLD MEMBER

Post data collection, deciding which cases to examine further was the final step. In order to examine effects, I divided the data further still. I grouped multiple felony violations into categories based on type of crime committed. Originally, I only had three groups: Theft, Domestic Violence, and Business-Related Crimes. Theft included charges of Theft of property, Theft by Receiving, and Robbery. Theft by Receiving is defined as “A person commits the offense of theft by receiving if he or she receives, retains, or disposes of stolen property of another person: (1) Knowing that the property was stolen; or (2) Having good reason to believe the property was stolen.” (2017 Arkansas code: Title 5 - Criminal Offenses: Subtitle 4 - offenses against property: Chapter 36 - theft: Subchapter 1 - general provisions: § 5-36-106. theft by receiving) Robbery was singled out due to its statutory definition in the 2019 Arkansas Code: “A person commits robbery if, with the purpose of committing a felony or misdemeanor theft or resisting apprehension immediately after committing a felony or misdemeanor theft, the person employs or threatens to immediately employ physical force upon another person.” (2010 Arkansas code: Title 5 - Criminal Offenses: Subtitle 2 - offenses against the person: Chapter 12 - Robbery: § 5-12-102 - robbery)

The Domestic Violence category included Aggravated Assault – Family or Household Member, Domestic Battering (1st through 3rd Degree). Aggravated Assault on a Family Member is defined as: “commit[ing] aggravated assault on a family or household member if, under circumstances manifesting extreme indifference to the value of human life, the person purposely engages in conduct that creates a substantial danger of death or serious physical injury to a family or household member.” Domestic Battering is categorized in a series of degrees based upon severity of injuries ranging from the most injurious, 1st degree, to least, 3rd degree which can be dropped down to a misdemeanor depending on circumstances. (Followill, 2017) Business-Related Crime was comprised of Commercial Burglary, Financial or Non-Financial Fraud, and Forgery. Commercial Burglary occurs “if [a person] enters or remains unlawfully in a commercial occupiable structure of another person with the purpose of committing in the commercial occupiable structure any offense punishable by imprisonment.” (2010 Arkansas

code: Title 5 - Criminal Offenses: Subtitle 4 - offenses against property: Chapter 39 - burglary, trespass, and other intrusions: Subchapter 2 - offenses generally: § 5-39-201 - residential burglary - commercial burglary.)

Financial or Non-Financial Identity Fraud happens when “(a) A person commits financial identity fraud if, with the purpose to: (1) Create, obtain, or open a credit account, debit account, or other financial resource for his or her benefit or for the benefit of a third party, he or she accesses, obtains, records, or submits to a financial institution another person's identifying information for the purpose of opening or creating a credit account, debit account, or financial resource without the authorization of the person identified by the information; or (2) Appropriate a financial resource of another person to his or her own use or to the use of a third party without the authorization of that other person, the actor: (A) Uses a scanning device; or (B) Uses a re-encoder. (b) A person commits nonfinancial identity fraud if he or she knowingly obtains another person's identifying information without the other person's authorization and uses the identifying information for any unlawful purpose, including without limitation: (1) To avoid apprehension or criminal prosecution; (2) To harass another person; or (3) To obtain or to attempt to obtain a good, service, real property, or medical information of another person. This crime was included in the business-related category instead of crimes against an individual as financial information directly effects financial institutions and ability to conduct oneself. (2010 Arkansas code: Title 5 - Criminal Offenses: Subtitle 4 - offenses against property: Chapter 37 - forgery and fraudulent practices: Subchapter 2 - offenses generally: § 5-37-227 - financial identity fraud -- nonfinancial identity fraud -- restitution -- venue.)

As data was analyzed, these three categories didn't account for even 20% of the felony violations. The great section of the data was getting ignored: drug crimes. Therefore, a fourth category was created, containing: Possession of a Controlled Substance (all schedules), Possession of Drug Paraphernalia, Delivering a Controlled Substance, as well as Possession with the Purpose to Deliver a Controlled Substance. The schedule of a drug is determined by severity of the substance. For instance, Schedule I drugs include opiates and hallucinogenic and do not have an accepted medical use. This goes down all the way to Schedule VI drugs like marijuana that are deemed less dangerous but still pose some risk to public health. The only Possession of Drug Paraphernalia charge that is a felony violation is paraphernalia used for meth, heroin, fentanyl, or cocaine. Delivering a Controlled Substance and Possession with the Purpose to Deliver a Controlled Substance are separate felonies from mere possession, oftentimes one can be charged with Possession, Delivering, and Possession with Purpose to Deliver. (Linebaugh, 2020)

The addition of the fourth category is not purely out of dissecting the data – drug crimes influence business greatly. An Obama era study from the Office of Drug Control Policy breaks down effects on business and the economy as a whole. In 2009, the majority of current drug users were employed either part or full time, saw more employers, and worked less days than their non-drug using coworkers. (*How illicit drug use affects business and the economy* 2017) While the study is older, the United States' declaration of a war on drugs has not disappeared.

RESULTS

Summary

Over the six months of data collected, there was a total of 1,391 cases accumulating 2,616 felony violations, and 351 unique felonies in Washington County, Arkansas. The 2019 data took much of the caseload with 786 cases and 1424 felony violations. The 2020 data was

not far behind with 605 cases and 1192 felony violations. These data points are represented by Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1- Total number of cases and felony violations between 2019 and 2020

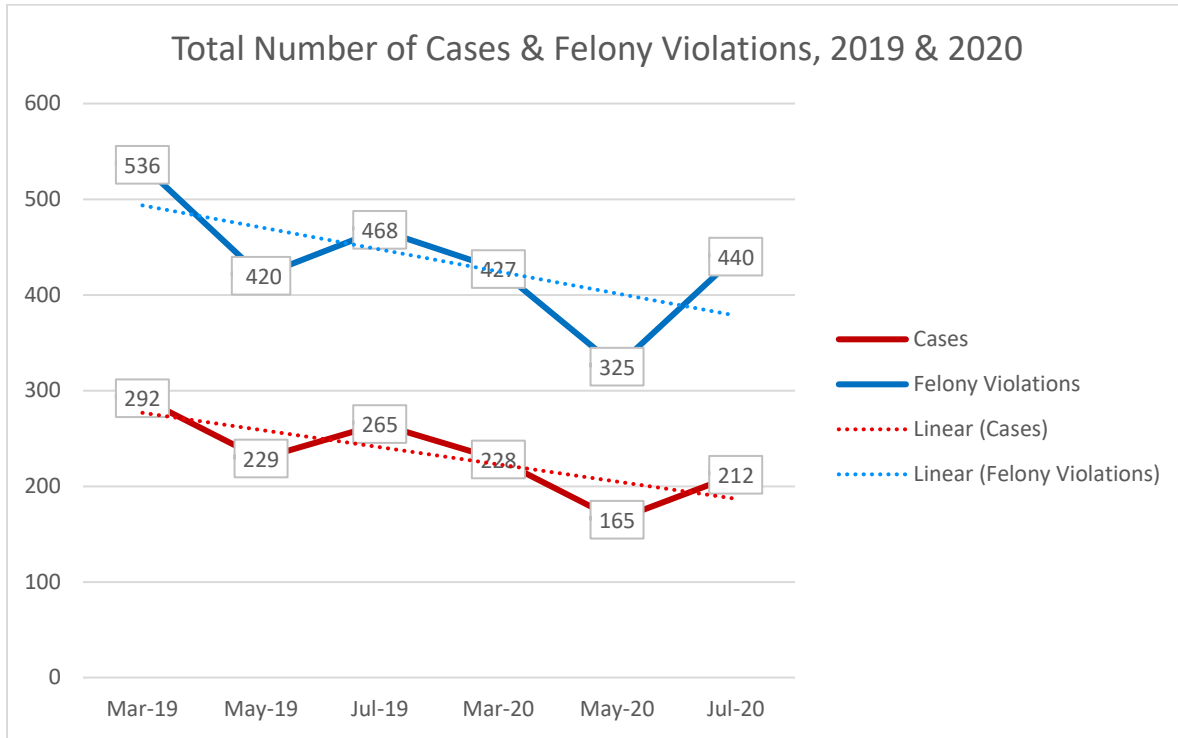
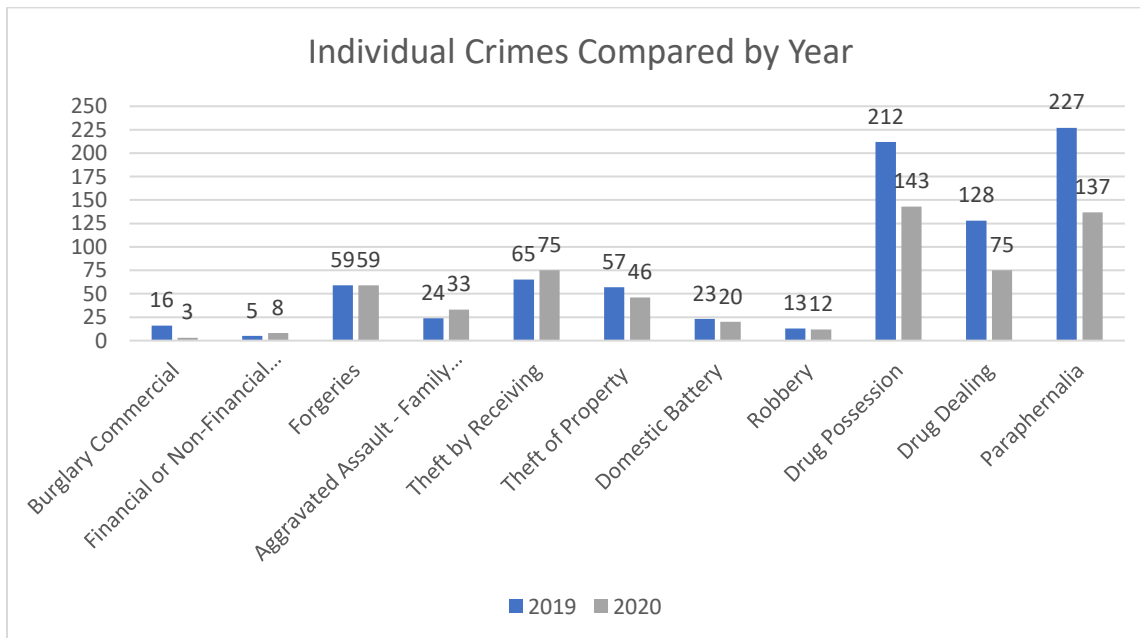
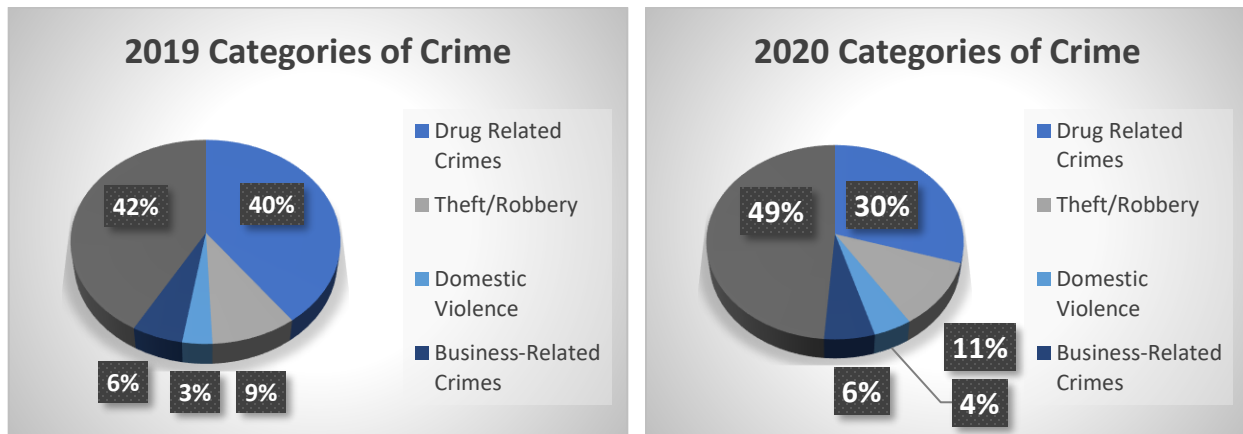


Figure 2- Comparison of individual crimes by year



The first category of crimes was theft. This consists of Theft of Property, Theft by Receiving, and Robbery. From 2019 to 2020, there was a 7.14% increase in Theft by Receiving while there was a 10.68% and a 0.97% case decrease in Theft of Property and Robbery respectively. Overall, the Theft category saw a 2% increase. Second was the Domestic Violence category, containing Aggravated Assault on Family or Household Members and all degrees of Domestic Battering. Aggravated Assault on a Family or Household member saw a 15.79% increase while all degrees of domestic battery decreased by 2.33%. This section experienced a 1% increase. Next was the Business-Related Crimes of Commercial Burglary, Financial or Non-Financial Fraud, and Forgery. Commercial Burglary had an 81.25% decrease, Financial or Non-Financial Fraud had a 23.08% increase, and the amount of Forgery cases stayed the same between 2019 and 2020. Business-related crimes had no overall categorical change. The last category was Drug Crimes. Drug Possession saw a 19.44% decrease, Drug Dealing saw a 26.11% decrease, and Possession of Drug Paraphernalia experienced a 24.73% decrease. While having the highest number of cases in a category, Drug related crimes decreased 10% from 2019 to 2020. In both years, the various crimes not relevant to this study make up the majority of crimes committed, and these crimes actually did see an increase. Figures 3 and 4 represent the groupings of the overall crimes per year.

Figures 3 & 4- Categories of Crime broken down by year



Limitations

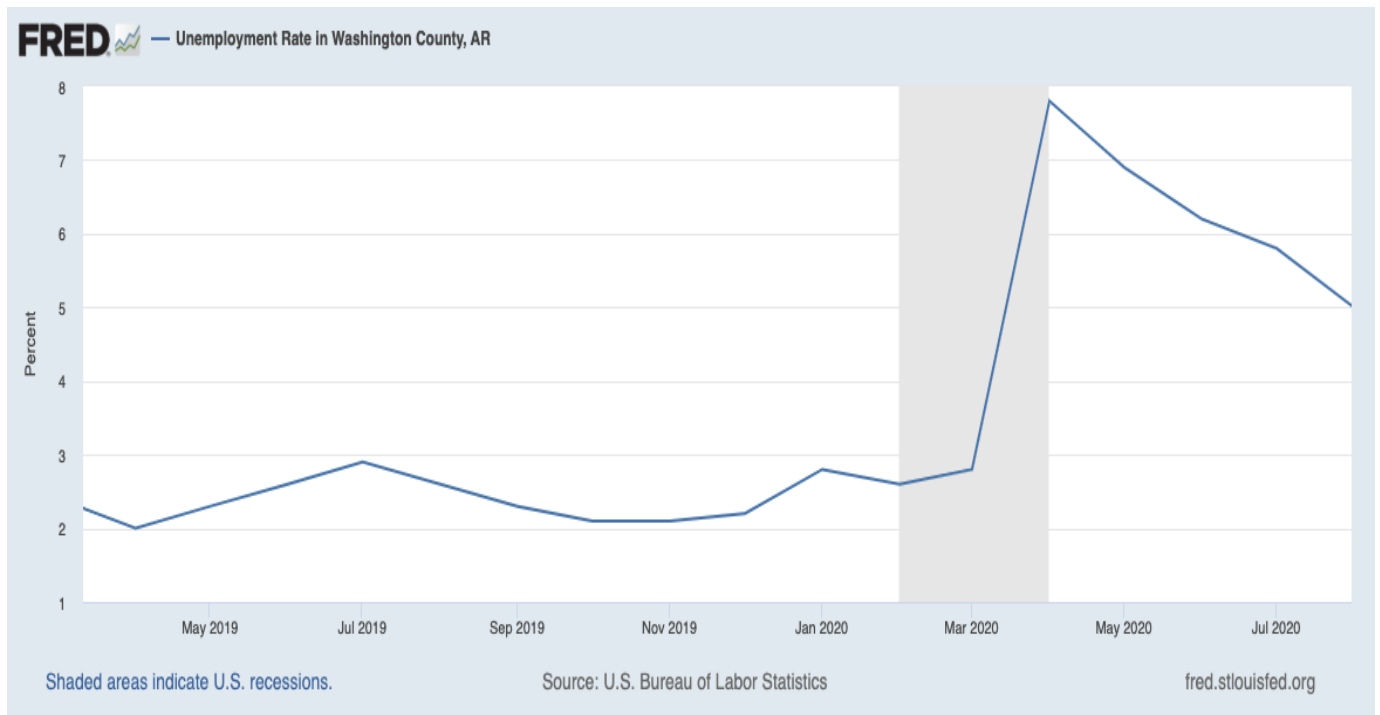
There is a general downward trend in both cases and violations that could be due to several reasons. Firstly, as in many experiments, it is important to think outside of the data collected to why instances of crime may not have been recorded. Many people who would normally be in the public were suddenly at home where they may not have a witness to call in police intervention. Additionally, there is much discretion in the legal system; prosecutors may not have decided to pursue all charges possible based on evidence provided, especially if there was a problem with how evidence was collected. Even still, some records of felony cases held an empty violation section, or the violations had been brought down to misdemeanors through subsequent pleas and therefore not recorded in this dataset. Furthermore, arraignment, trial, and plea dates were all rescheduled due to logistical issues stemming from the pandemic. The Supreme Court of Arkansas suspended all hearings from March 18, 2020, to April 3, 2020, except those deemed most urgent, such as welfare of minors, time-sensitive cases, and proceedings necessary to protect the constitutional rights of the defendant, effective in every

county. The original per curiam decision allowed for extensions of these dates as the pandemic progressed. (*In Re Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020*) This allowed for a backlog of cases to be built up, and present dealings to decrease. The overall decrease in crimes was an unexpected finding in this study.

Implications for Business

Such as citizens wish to live in communities they deem safe (due to things like low crime rates), so too do businesses want to exist in communities that will support them. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has estimated crime to be a factor in 30% of business failures. (Bressler, 2007) Both internal and external crimes are included in this estimate. The data gathered through this study shows some of each type: fraud and identity theft internally with robbery and commercial burglary externally. The main factors that lead to internal crimes are financial incentive, opportunity, and rationalization. Of the three factors, the first two are also true of external crime. (Bressler & Bressler, 2017) During the COVID-19 pandemic, financial motivation was at an all time high. From March of 2020 to April of the same year, the unemployment rate in Washington County increased 5% as seen in Figure 5. (*Unemployment rate in Washington County, AR*) This is the highest unemployment had been since January of 2011 during the U.S. Debt Ceiling crisis, and even still it was 0.9% lower than the April of 2020 spike.

Figure 5- Unemployment rate in Washington County, Arkansas from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis



While the financial incentive was more than likely present for many people, there isn't an overall trend in the data corresponding with these unemployment rates. In fact, times where unemployment was low saw more crimes. This could be due to limited opportunity to commit crimes. Though the state of Arkansas never issued a stay-at-home order, many businesses closed, and public offices dropped down to minimal staff on March 18th, 2020. The governor only

started to reopen businesses on May 4th, 2020, starting with places of worship and gradually expanding from there. (*Recovery timeline*, n.d.) Many of these openings included capacity limitations, so even if a business reopened, they were not back to full operational status.

Lastly, rationalization of actions, feeling like a business owes a person something more than they receive from their job benefits. During the pandemic, cries rang out from every direction to protect small businesses whose welfare was directly impacted by closures and supply chain delays. As for big business, there was an increased demand for businesses to take care of not only their shareholders but they're stakeholders too: including employees. In 2020, Just Capital working with Harris Poll found that 50% of Americans thought "large companies are doing well in promoting an economy that serves all Americans." (*Amidst crisis, what Americans want from Corporate America: Just Capital's 2020 survey results*, 2020)

Another obstacle businesses faced across the board were hiring and retaining employees. 24% of Arkansas companies reported difficulties in hiring in 2020. (*Census, Small Business Pulse Survey Data*) Many companies screen for criminal charges or drug use, so drug crimes remain yet another hurdle in employment opportunities. A 2021 article from the Society of Human Resource Management reports that "75% of employers have been directly impacted" by drug use, yet only 17% felt prepared to handle the situation. (Grensing-Pophal, 2021) The drug use has only been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic with substance abuse related fatalities reaching an all-time 12 month high of 100,000 deaths between April 2020 and April 2021. (Grensing-Pophal, 2021)

Domestic Violence Crimes & COVID-19

An unexpected trend in the data was the small increase in domestic violence cases. Oral accounts tell of rapid increases of cases in large cities in the U.S. such as San Antonio, Texas, Portland, Oregon, and New York City, New York. (Kluger, 2021) A possible reason for such a small increase in Washington County could be population size, density, and existing rates. These cities are some of the largest in the country with New York City having the highest population density in the country. (*Population - New York city population*) Meanwhile, Washington County is far more spread out with a mere 261.2 people per square mile. (*Washington County*, 2022) That is not to say that the increase in domestic violence cases is not troubling! This increase is even more troubling when considering raises in stressors that classically increase domestic violence like job loss combined with business closures and limited movement allowed from the home.

The pandemic only made it harder for victims of domestic violence to escape. Hotlines and shelters that would typically help victims to escape where either inoperative or at a limited capacity. Additionally, the abuser was now more frequently in the home with victims, limiting the time window in which a victim would feel more comfortable asking for help or physically leaving. The United Nations has called this increase in domestic violence a "shadow pandemic" that obscures the true extent of the effects of the viral pandemic. (Kluger, 2021)

Theft & Covid-19

Worldwide, theft and robbery went down by 50% in some countries, with larger decreases where stricter lockdowns were in place. This decline is likely due to an overall decrease in commission of these types of crimes as well as reports. These changes were brief, and rates returned to their normal state. (*Research brief: Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on homicide and property crime* 2020) In a much smaller case, Washington

County never shut down completely; the state of Arkansas never put a lockdown order into effect. While many businesses closed, others stayed operational serving customers through pick-up or delivery services.

As with the reasons for business-related crimes, property crimes like theft are also motivated by economic incentives and opportunity. While opportunity went down between the March 2020 and May 2020 data points, the state of Arkansas had fully reopened industries with some to no capacity restrictions by June 5, 2020. (*CDC Museum Covid-19 Timeline*, 2022) At that point, both the economic incentive of lost income and the opportunity presented itself to people who may have otherwise not committed these types of crime.

Conclusions

As the historian Henry Thomas Buckle once said, “society prepares the crime; the criminal commits it.” (*Henry Thomas Buckle quote* n.d.) The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of life. From businesses forced to close their doors permanently to people forced to move out of houses, it is a definitive time of crisis. While some people and business were fortunate enough to be flexible in rapidly changing circumstances, not all had that security. When people are acting out of a place of fear, they tend to lash out or do whatever they feel necessary to survive or to cope, no matter the legality of the act.

Between all 1,391 cases and 2,616 felony violations, there is an important story told. The data collected did show increases in the categories of theft and domestic violence. While the threat to businesses fluctuated from each unique crime to another, the overall effect was null. Surprisingly, though the data consisted mainly of drug related crimes, the category itself saw an overall decrease from 2019 to 2020. While the amount of felony violations decreased by 8.87%, courts also experienced delays and backlogs like never seen before. Every aspect of the COVID-19 has been unprecedented and surprising, a rollercoaster like no other. The overall impact of the pandemic on crime is unknown – for each case there may have been ten more commissions of the same like that went unreported or unnoticed, and the longer the pandemic lasts the more variable its effects. As more is learned about the COVID-19 pandemic and its longstanding effects, it is possible that these numbers will mean different things in a different context. At this time, however, this data shows that matters of the home such as security and safety of both people and possessions were threatened more than the year before. Whether this threat is to be permanent, or a mere fluctuation remains to be seen. It can be said, however, that reports of felony crimes in Washington County, Arkansas decreased from 2019 levels during the period of March 11th, 2020, to July 31st, 2020.

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