



The right to property and public safety during the pandemic: A human rights perspective on property crimes in Kosovo

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Abstract

The right to property is guaranteed by legal acts but is often violated in various forms, for which corresponding sanctions are provided. These violations include theft, aggravated theft, theft in the nature of robbery, and robbery. In Kosovo, these crimes have been prevalent for some time, but what sparks scholarly interest is the connection between the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in Kosovo in March 2020, and various preventive measures, such as curfews, quarantine, work closures, and cultural activity restrictions, and their impact on the occurrence of certain thefts, not only in the Municipality of Prizren but throughout Kosovo. To achieve the desired results, several research methods were applied, including theoretical analysis, statistical methods, interviews, and comparative methods. The findings indicate a slight decrease in theft and aggravated theft cases, while there was a slight increase in robbery cases at the municipal level. This increase is attributed to the movement restrictions due to the curfew, as well as the engagement of the police in enforcing these measures, which limited the perpetrators' ability to act freely. At the national level, however, the same restrictive measures led to a significant decrease in theft, aggravated theft, and robbery.

Keywords: Republic of Kosovo, COVID-19, Economic factors, Psychological factors, Restriction measures, Thefts

Introduction

The right to property is a fundamental right guaranteed by various legal acts, including national constitutions. In Kosovo, this right is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (2008), which states that property rights are protected, and no one can be arbitrarily deprived of their property. However, under certain circumstances, this right may be violated due to various factors, including economic and psychological conditions.

Restrictive measures, such as imprisonment, are known to reduce crime by limiting opportunities for criminal activity. Imprisonment serves as a form of isolation aimed at preventing further offenses. A parallel can be drawn between imprisonment and quarantine, as both restrict individuals' movement and are enforced by security institutions. However, their effects on property-related crimes cannot be generalized (Craig et al., 2023).

At the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, the world faced a rapidly spreading virus, causing severe symptoms and, in many cases, death. Named SARS-CoV-2, the virus spread quickly, and its treatment was still unknown, leading to widespread fatalities. As the virus continued to spread, countries began implementing measures to curb its transmission.

Among these measures were restrictive actions such as isolation, quarantine, and limitations on economic, educational, and other activities. These changes affected all aspects of life, including the justice system (Mille & Blumstein, 2020). The global COVID-19 pandemic triggered unpredictable trends, requiring immediate, effective, and appropriate responses to address the new challenges (Delev & Najdova, 2021). These measures significantly impacted the social, economic, and political landscape, ultimately influencing crime rates and their distribution worldwide (Arora et al., 2020). The World Health Organization not only declared the international public health emergency, it also offered recommendations for preventive measures, movement restrictions, and health crisis management. All of this is related to the organization's goals, which coordinate international health issues, support governments, and provide necessary assistance in emergencies, as was the case with the Covid 19 pandemic (Riza, 2012).

In March 2020, the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic began spreading in Kosovo, forcing the country to implement various preventive measures to limit its spread. Among these measures was a curfew, which prohibited citizens from leaving their residences at certain times, except in emergencies or for essential reasons. During this period, business, recreational,

and cultural activities were banned, leading to an economic crisis that affected every family. As a result of these and other preventive measures, citizens' well-being was negatively impacted (Elshani et al., 2023). Given these influencing factors, a key question arises: did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the frequency of theft, aggravated theft, robbery, and similar crimes?

Research in the Republic of Kosovo on property crimes reveals a decrease in theft, aggravated theft, and robbery during the restrictive measures (Hashani, 2021). However, while these studies provide data at the national level, there is a lack of similar research focusing on changes in property crime rates within specific local contexts, such as a municipality. Therefore, due to these data gaps, there is a need for research at the local level, particularly in the Municipality of Prizren, to address the identified shortcomings in the justice literature.

This paper aims to examine the incidence of specific property crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Municipality of Prizren, comparing the rates of certain types of theft before and during the pandemic. The objective is to contribute to the research literature by assessing whether anti-COVID measures influenced the increase, decrease, or had no impact on the frequency of theft, aggravated theft, robbery, and similar crimes. Additionally, the study seeks to evaluate the role of psychological and economic factors in the occurrence of these property crimes.

This paper aims to make a significant contribution to the field of justice by providing a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the occurrence of aggravated theft and robbery, particularly under the unusual conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to support the research of law scholars and practitioners by filling the gap in data on crime rates during the pandemic, specifically regarding property crimes. This work will serve as a valuable resource for future research in the field.

Objectives of the study

To examine the changes in the frequency of property crimes, specifically theft, aggravated theft, robbery, and similar crimes, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Municipality of Prizren.

To evaluate whether the restrictive measures, had a tangible impact on reducing property crimes or whether they inadvertently contributed to changes in crime rates.

To explore the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals in the Municipality of Prizren and its potential correlation with increased or decreased rates of property crimes.

To investigate how psychological factors, due to the pandemic and its associated measures, have affected the occurrence of property crimes in the local context.

Methodology

By examining official data on property crimes from the Prizren Regional Police Directorate, this study employed a quantitative methodology. A statistics report covering theft, robbery, aggravated theft, and theft in the nature of robbery was obtained by a formal request. The study covered two periods: March–December 2019 (before to the epidemic) and March–December 2020 (during the pandemic and restrictive measures). In order to find any changes or factors that might have influenced these trends, such as movement limitations and the economic effects of the pandemic, the analysis examined the frequency and distribution of these crimes in the two periods.

It can be accepted that, given the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, there may have been some biases and restrictions in the use of police data. Underreporting or decreased interaction with law enforcement during times of movement restrictions and lockdowns could be one possible drawback. People may have had fewer opportunity to report crimes, especially property crimes, to the authorities during these periods because public mobility was severely restricted. Furthermore, some people might have been reluctant or unable to report criminal activity as they often would have because of the curfew and other constraints. The general accuracy of crime statistics may have been impacted by some incidents remaining unreported or being underreported as a result of less involvement with law enforcement.

The theoretical analysis

Is another element of the methodology used to

support the theoretical interpretation of the topic. It involves consulting relevant literature in the field of justice, such as property rights, the Criminal Code, and the role of the police in recording and monitoring the frequency of crimes. This analysis helps in preparing a theoretical and legal framework on the phenomenon of property crimes during the pandemic.

The comparative method was used to analyze statistical data and compare the number of property crime cases (theft, aggravated theft, theft in the nature of robbery, and robbery) during the periods of 2019 and 2020, in order to assess the impact of the restrictive measures during the pandemic.

The interview method

Included interviews with officials from the Basic Prosecutor's Office in Prizren (two officials), the Basic Court in Prizren (five officials), two psychologists, and five economists, all from the Municipality of Prizren. The interviewees were asked for their opinions on the impact of restrictive measures on the number of aggravated theft cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the economic and psychological factors that might have influenced this issue.

Research Results and Discussion

Prevalence of property crimes before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Kosovo.

The Municipality of Prizren is relatively calm in terms of property crimes, particularly theft. However, the frequency of thefts fluctuates over time. Citizens have observed a tendency for theft to increase, especially during the winter months when longer nights and increased movement lead to more opportunities for property to be left unattended.

At the beginning of 2020, the world was alarmed by the spread of a new virus, COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, theft rates in the Municipality of Prizren remained relatively stable, showing no significant increase or decrease. By the end of 2019, news of a new, highly aggressive virus from the Coronavirus family, named SARS-CoV-2, began circulating globally. It was reported that this virus was claiming thousands of lives daily in China. It wasn't long before

the virus spread to other parts of the world, including Europe. By early 2020, Kosovo, along with its neighboring countries, awaited the inevitable first case, knowing it was only a matter of time, as had already occurred in most countries.

On March 13, 2020, Kosovo confirmed its first two cases of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Shehu, 2020). In response, the government implemented several preventive measures to curb the spread of the infection. Among the first measures were the suspension of the educational process, temporary halting of air and land travel from high-risk countries, forced self-quarantine for citizens entering from epidemic hotspots, and the prohibition of gastronomic activities after 11:00 p.m. (Qeveria e Republikës së Kosovës, 2020). The government later introduced a curfew, restricting the movement of citizens and vehicles from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and from 8:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., except for essential medical or food needs. Throughout 2020, the government adjusted these measures based on the pandemic situation in each municipality. In April, for example, citizens were allowed to move for 90 minutes, depending on the last digit of their identification card number.

In July 2020, the curfew was adjusted to 10:30 p.m. to 5:00 a.m., and by November, the curfew was lifted entirely, though gastronomic activities were limited to 9:00 p.m. Throughout December 2020, anti-COVID measures were continuously updated, affecting the social, economic, and psychological well-being of the country (Qeveria e Republikës së Kosovës, 2020; Zoqi, 2024).

To accurately assess property crimes before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, data was obtained from security and law enforcement agencies, such as the Kosovo Police, specifically the Regional Police Directorate in Prizren. Under the Law on Police (2012), this institution is responsible for registering reported crimes, in addition to ensuring public security. After submitting a written request, the Regional Police Directorate provided a statistical report on the frequency of theft, aggravated theft, robbery, and theft in the nature of robbery. These data cover two periods: March–December 2019 (before the pandemic) and March–December 2020 (during the pandemic and the restrictive measures).

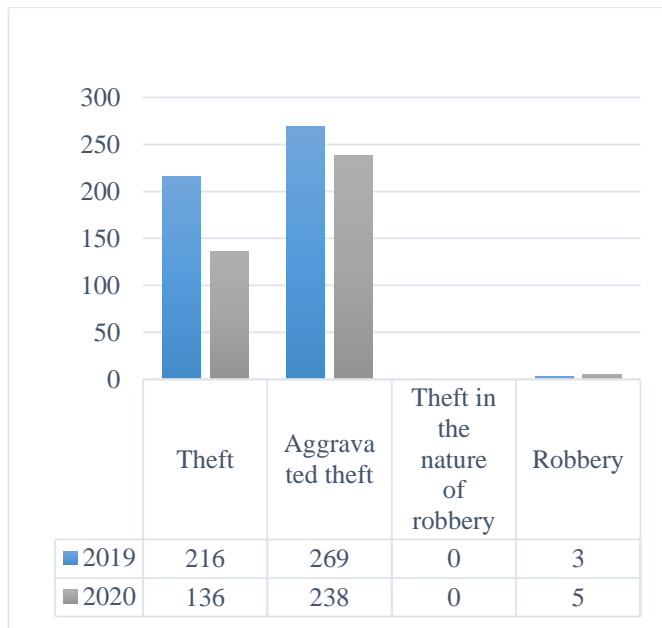


Fig 1. Statistical data according to the regional police directorate in Prizren for 2019 and 2020

Source: Author's elaboration

According to the statistical report from the Regional Police Directorate in Prizren, aggravated theft was the most prevalent crime before the pandemic, with 269 reported cases. Theft was the second most common offense, while robbery was rare, with only three cases, and no cases of theft in the nature of robbery were recorded.

The following section discusses the same crimes during the March–December 2020 period, when Kosovo faced a series of restrictive measures aimed at curbing the virus spread. During this period, the Regional Police Directorate in Prizren recorded 238 cases of aggravated theft, 136 cases of theft, and five cases of robbery. Theft in the nature of robbery remained unchanged, with no recorded cases. When comparing the pre-pandemic period to the pandemic period, aggravated theft decreased by 31 cases, while robbery increased by two cases. Theft declined by 80 cases during the pandemic. These data suggest a reduction in property crimes at the local level during the pandemic.

Research by Hashani (2021) at the national level also indicates a decrease in property crimes during the pandemic.

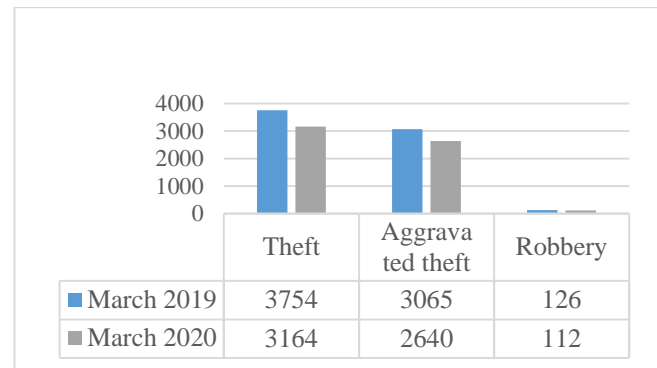


Fig 2. Statistics for property crimes for 2019 and 2020 in the Republic of Kosovo

Source: Hashani, 2021.

Regarding theft offenses, compared to the previous period, there were 590 fewer cases reported to the Kosovo Police during the pandemic. The number of thefts decreased from 3,754 cases in 2019 to 3,164 cases in 2020, representing a 15.7% reduction in thefts during the pandemic period (Hashani, 2021).

A similar decrease in criminal activity was observed for aggravated theft. During the pandemic period, 425 fewer cases were reported. The number of aggravated thefts decreased from 3,754 in 2019 to 2,640 in 2020, reflecting a 13.86% reduction in aggravated thefts during the pandemic (Hashani, 2021).

The criminal offense of robbery also saw a decline. From March–December 2019, 126 robbery cases were reported, while during the pandemic period in 2020, this number dropped to 112 cases, showing an 11.11% decrease in robbery incidents (Hashani, 2021).

In addition to criminal offenses against property, the Kosovo Police during 2020 has identified some changes in the spread of some other criminal offenses compared to 2019. The number of murders increased by 26.08%. The number of serious bodily injuries decreased by 5.66%. Meanwhile, the number of cases of domestic violence increased by 8.04% (Policia e Kosovës, 2020).

Although there is ample evidence of an increase in interpersonal violence during times of crisis, reaction and data collection have been complicated by widespread underreporting: less than 40% of women

who experience violence report the crime or seek any assistance. Less than 10% of women who do seek assistance end up with the police. Nevertheless, preliminary data indicates that helplines in Cyprus and Singapore have seen a rise in calls of almost 30%. In New South Wales, 40% of frontline workers said they received more calls for assistance related to violence. Since the March 17 lockdown, the number of domestic abuse cases in France has climbed by 30%. Since the March 20 lockdown, emergency calls for domestic violence in Argentina have risen by 25% (Macit, 2021). American homicide rates declined dramatically in April and May, presumably as a result of coronavirus business closures and stay-in-place orders. Using crime data from 64 U.S. cities, the researchers found that homicide rates declined by 21.5 % in April and 9.9 % in May compared to the previous three-year average for those months (Macit, 2021).

Regarding the frequency of cybercrime, law enforcement agencies around the European Union observed a dramatic rise in cybercrime offenses during the initial weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak. The threat of cybercrime has also changed throughout the course of the crisis; since the epidemic hit Europe, simple phishing and malware assaults have given way to increasingly intricate and sophisticated ones. In order to plan extensive phishing campaigns and increase the impact of their attacks, fraudsters were seen to be actively seeking partners in the early weeks of the crisis (Europol, 2020).

Property crimes around the world during COVID-19 restrictive measures

Like Kosovo, many countries implemented restrictive measures to prevent the virus from becoming a global disaster. These included lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, closure of non-essential businesses, social distancing, travel restrictions, and remote work and education. The implementation and enforcement of these measures varied depending on each country's situation and the effectiveness of the response.

These measures had a significant impact on economic and psychological well-being and potentially influenced criminal behavior, particularly property crimes, which are the focus of this research. Limited interaction between potential victims and offenders

likely decreased thefts, as such crimes often occur during human interactions. In places where businesses were closed or severely restricted, commercial burglaries were expected to decrease. The increased guardianship from people staying at home was also expected to reduce residential burglaries, vehicle thefts, and thefts from vehicles (Miller et al., 2023).

According to research by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020), property crimes marked a significant decline during the pandemic. The data, covering over 22 countries across five regions (Asia: Mongolia, Macao, China; Europe: Albania, Croatia, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Moldova, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain; Latin America and the Caribbean: Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay; Oceania: New Zealand; Africa: Eswatini, Namibia), shows notable reductions.

From February to April 2020, the number of robberies and aggravated thefts decreased by 58%, while thefts fell by 78%. In the first half of 2020, 21.8% of Mexican households reported being victims of theft, robbery, or aggravated robbery, a decrease of 37.5% compared to the same period in 2019, and 38.2% compared to the second half of 2019 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). In France, authorities reported a 45% drop in crime between March and April, with the largest decreases in residential burglaries, armed robberies, and vehicle thefts. Similarly, authorities in the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, and Sweden observed a reduction in thefts, with thefts in Greece dropping by 25% by April (Max Security, 2020; Amirzehni et al., 2025).

According to an article from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, robberies and thefts in the United States experienced a significant decline in 2020. Residential burglaries, which had been steadily decreasing since 2017, remained lower throughout 2020 and early 2021. Overall, property crimes decreased from 2020 to 2022, although there was a rise in the first half of 2022. Nonresidential burglaries, including commercial burglaries, remained relatively stable throughout 2020 and early 2021 compared to previous years (College of Social Sciences and Humanities of Northeastern University, 2023). Similarly, in Japan, property crimes decreased by 20.9% in 2020, particularly during the lockdowns

imposed to prevent the spread of the virus (Shen et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2024).

In Istanbul, the average number of theft cases dropped from 35 per day to 15, according to data from the Istanbul Police Department. There was also a decline in the number of calls to the 155 Police Emergency Line. As many residents of Istanbul stayed at home due to concerns over COVID-19, theft rates decreased by 37% (Macit, 2021).

Protection of property rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic under International Law

During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency measures imposed by many states affected individuals' and businesses' property rights, raising questions about their compliance with international law. A key instrument governing property rights is the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), specifically Article 1 of Protocol No. 1, which guarantees protection for property rights (Council of Europe, 1952). This provision ensures that no one can be deprived of their property except in the public interest and under the conditions prescribed by law. It strikes a balance between protecting public interests and safeguarding individual rights, always in line with the principle of proportionality.

Additionally, the alignment of state measures with international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 17), which protects the right to property, is essential. Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, along with regional treaties like the African and American Charters on Human Rights, provide frameworks for protecting property from misuse (United Nations, 1948). Emergency measures during the pandemic should not be used as a pretext for violating these obligations. Instead, states must adhere to principles such as proportionality, necessity, and non-discrimination, ensuring that restrictions on property are temporary, regulated by law, and proportionate (United Nations, 2020).

During the pandemic, some states confiscated essential materials, such as personal protective equipment and medicines, or imposed restrictions on the use of private property for health-related purposes. In such cases, compliance with international law hinges on two key factors:

Legitimacy of the measures: Restrictions must be based on law and in line with necessary public objectives, such as protecting public health.

Fair compensation: In cases where individuals or businesses are deprived of their property, the state must offer fair and prompt compensation, as outlined in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

A significant example of the application of these standards is the case *Sporrong and Lönnroth v. Sweden*, where the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) examined the proportionality of property restrictions, highlighting the importance of protecting individuals from excessive state measures (European Court of Human Rights, 1982).

To address the rise in property crimes during the pandemic, international cooperation plays a critical role. Organizations like INTERPOL and Europol help coordinate efforts between states to combat criminal activities that transcend national borders. Crimes such as financial fraud, the smuggling of medical goods, and the looting of humanitarian aid became significant global challenges, requiring coordinated responses. One key example is Operation Pangea, led by INTERPOL, which focused on tackling the illegal sale of medicines and medical equipment in the global market during the pandemic. This operation showcased how international cooperation can effectively mitigate the impact of property crimes on a global scale (INTERPOL, 2020).

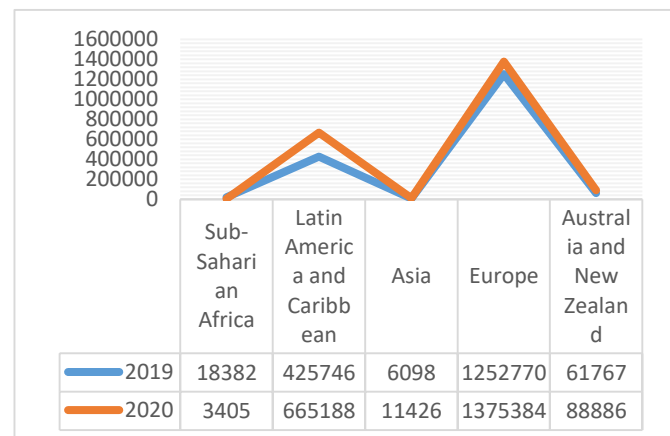


Fig 3. Statistics for property crimes for 2019 and 2020 around the world

Source. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020

Economic and psychological conditions under the influence of restrictive measures

According to research published by the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce, the American Chamber of Commerce in Kosovo, the German-Kosovo Chamber of Commerce, the European Investors Council, and the Kosovo Manufacturing Club (2020), restrictive measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 significantly decreased the work capacities of economic operators. Approximately eighty-six percent of respondents and sixty-five percent of surveyed businesses reported being at risk of survival. In the early weeks of the measures, around 2,948 people were laid off, and ninety-two percent of businesses stated they had experienced a decline in sales (Kosovo Chamber of Commerce, 2020).

The increase in crime rates is one of the consequences of many people being economically affected by the pandemic. In such circumstances, some individuals resorted to crime as a shortcut to address their financial difficulties (Girsang and Petrus, 2022). The restrictive measures, while aimed at controlling the virus, left citizens facing economic challenges and, in some cases, the obligation to remain closed during curfew hours. These conditions, compounded by the strain on psychological well-being, led to various other difficulties affecting their mental health and overall stability.

Research on the economic system and mental health during the restrictive measures indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to curb its spread led to a dramatic decline in the economy in certain countries, with a corresponding massive psychological impact. Most respondents reported increased levels of anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and other psychological issues. This research underscores the close connection between the pandemic's economic decline and the deterioration of psychological well-being, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between the two. According to the findings, worsening economic factors lead to psychological imbalances, while psychological distress, such as depression and anxiety caused by the pandemic, contributes to a less efficient workforce, further exacerbating economic challenges (Salameh et al., 2022).

According to a report published by the Ministry of

Health of Kosovo (2020), the PHQ-9 questionnaire, completed by 198 people aged 16-64 years (with an average age of 27.04 years), revealed that 65.2% of participants reported that their psychological condition had worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 42.4% of respondents were found to exhibit some form of depressive disorder, ranging from mild to severe (Ministry of Health, 2020).

As part of this research, interviews were conducted with prosecutorial and judicial officials who provided insights on how the restrictive measures influenced the prevalence of property crimes. According to the data collected from written interviews with these officials, approximately sixty percent reported an increase in property crime cases. The primary factor cited was the economic decline, which forced individuals to seek alternative, sometimes illegal, ways to support themselves or their families. Another group of officials believed that the involvement of the police in anti-COVID actions provided perpetrators with more freedom to commit crimes.

The remaining forty percent of interviewees, however, argued that the COVID-19 measures generally led to a reduction in property crimes, as most citizens stayed inside their homes, which gave them the opportunity to protect their assets. Increased police patrols were also seen as a deterrent to would-be criminals.

Additionally, psychologists in the Municipality of Prizren were interviewed to understand the psychological impact of the COVID-19 measures on citizens. According to the psychologists, the restrictive measures negatively affected many individuals, with the restrictions on movement, economic hardship, and other factors leading to a range of consequences. They noted that many people experienced anxiety and a pervasive fear of death. Others suffered from the loss of family members, friends, or community members, while even those who hadn't directly been impacted lived with the constant worry that they might one day be affected.

According to another psychologist interviewed, the psychological impact of the COVID-19 measures was even more significant than what was reported in the media. She noted a marked increase in the number of people seeking professional psychological support in

her clinic following the implementation of isolation measures. The most common issues reported by patients were depression, anxiety, insomnia, and paranoia. These conditions were attributed to social distancing, which caused individuals to feel disconnected from the world around them and fearful of the unknown.

She explained that citizens, facing an unfamiliar virus with uncertain consequences and treatment, experienced widespread fear regarding their own well-being, the health of their parents, children, and relatives, as well as the broader impact on society. Furthermore, she believed that media reports predicting a looming economic crisis exacerbated these psychological issues among citizens. As a result, decision-making became clouded, driven more by emotion than reason. This created an environment where some individuals, seeing theft as a quick and low-risk solution, were more likely to commit crimes, especially given the reduced police presence due to their involvement in enforcing the restrictive measures.

Discussion of Findings

The comparison of criminal offenses registered in Kosovo before and during the pandemic provides valuable insights into how crime trends evolved during an extraordinary period marked by social and state challenges. This analysis focuses on the years 2019 and 2020, specifically examining theft, aggravated theft, and robbery to understand the impact of the pandemic on criminal activity.

The research findings indicate a notable decline in property crimes across Kosovo, both at the municipal and national levels. The decrease of 31 cases of aggravated theft at the municipal level and 425 fewer cases at the national level during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period suggests that the restrictive measures implemented may have had a preventive effect on this type of crime. Several factors could have contributed to this decline, including increased police presence, movement restrictions, and greater public awareness of security measures, all of which likely deterred potential offenders from committing aggravated theft.

The significant decrease of 80 cases of theft at the municipal level and 590 cases at the national level

during the pandemic indicates a substantial reduction in this form of criminal activity. One possible explanation for this decline could be the reduced opportunities for theft due to lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, which limited people's mobility and access to public spaces where theft typically occurs. Additionally, heightened security measures at commercial establishments and increased community vigilance likely played a role in deterring attempted thefts.

However, the slight increase of 2 reported cases of robbery during the pandemic is an intriguing finding amidst the overall decline in theft-related offenses. This suggests that while opportunities for theft may have decreased, some criminals may have turned to robbery, which often involves the use of force or threats. Economic hardship, desperation, and the possible perception of reduced law enforcement presence during the pandemic could have contributed to individuals resorting to robbery despite the challenging circumstances. In contrast, the overall decline in robberies at the national level¹⁴ fewer cases reported during the pandemic period can be attributed to increased vigilance or fewer opportunities for criminals due to pandemic-related restrictions on movement and gatherings. This aligns with the general trend of reduced criminal activity during the pandemic.

The consistent absence of reported cases of theft categorized as robbery, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, suggests a certain level of stability in this particular type of criminal activity. It is possible that the nature of this offense, which typically involves higher levels of planning and risk, remained unchanged regardless of external factors such as pandemic-induced restrictions.

The majority of interviewees, around sixty percent of the sample, reported an increase in cases of theft, aggravated theft, robbery, and theft in the nature of robbery. These officials primarily attributed the rise in these offenses to the economic decline caused by the pandemic. The economic downturn pushed individuals to seek alternative means of survival, with some resorting to illegal activities to support themselves and their families. This finding highlights the complex relationship between socioeconomic conditions and criminal behavior, particularly in times of crisis.

Additionally, a significant portion of the interviewees within this group suggested that the diversion of police resources towards enforcing COVID-19 measures may have inadvertently facilitated criminal activities. With law enforcement agencies focusing on pandemic-related tasks, criminals may have perceived a reduced risk of apprehension, which could have emboldened them to commit theft and robbery offenses with greater impunity.

Conversely, approximately forty percent of the interviewees presented contrasting views, arguing that the measures implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 had a mitigating effect on aggravated theft and robbery. From this perspective, the imposition of restrictions, such as stay-at-home orders, contributed to a reduction in crime rates. With citizens largely confined to their homes, opportunities for criminal activities were significantly reduced, and individuals were better able to protect their property. Moreover, increased police patrols, which were primarily focused on ensuring compliance with pandemic regulations, acted as a deterrent, discouraging potential offenders from engaging in criminal behavior.

Interviews with psychologists from the Municipality of Prizren painted a troubling picture of the psychological impact caused by the pandemic and the associated restrictions. Many citizens have reported heightened levels of anxiety, fear of death, and experiences of loss and grief. There has also been a noticeable increase in individuals seeking psychological support, with symptoms of depression and anxiety often attributed to social isolation and the insecurity induced by the pandemic. The fear of the unknown regarding the virus has further exacerbated these psychological challenges. Addressing these issues is critical to safeguarding the mental well-being of the population, alongside the ongoing efforts to protect public health.

Conclusion

The research, based on the processed data, indicates that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding preventive measures, particularly those related to isolation, the Municipality of Prizren has experienced a slight decrease in the prevalence of theft and aggravated theft. However, the crime of robbery has seen a slight increase at the municipal

level. This trend of decreased property crimes due to restrictive measures is not limited to the municipal level but is also evident at the central or national level, positioning Kosovo among the countries where property crimes have significantly decreased.

Interviews conducted with institutional prosecutorial and judicial officials, as well as other professionals, suggest that the pandemic may have contributed to a slight increase in certain forms of theft, which aligns with the above findings. Furthermore, the restrictive measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have severely impacted the work capacities of economic operators. In the initial weeks of the measures, around 2,948 people were laid off, and 92% of the surveyed businesses reported a decline in sales.

The psychologists interviewed highlight the significant impact of COVID-19 measures on citizens' psychological well-being. According to them, many individuals experienced heightened anxiety and an overarching fear of death. Some faced the loss of family members, loved ones, or members of their community, while others, even if they didn't experience personal loss, lived in constant worry that they might be affected in the future.

Law enforcement officials noted a slight increase in criminal offenses, including theft, aggravated theft, and robbery, during the period of restrictive measures. They attributed this rise to the economic downturn, which pushed individuals to seek alternative, sometimes illegal, ways to support themselves and their families. While some believe that the intense focus of police efforts on enforcing COVID-19 measures provided criminals with greater opportunities to commit theft due to reduced patrols, others argue that the heightened police presence and patrols aimed at enforcing these measures limited the freedom of potential offenders, thereby preventing criminal actions.

Recommendations

Strengthening cooperation between legal and security institutions to better address crimes occurring during public health emergencies.

Increasing psychological support and assistance for individuals affected by economic and psychological

uncertainty during the pandemic, in order to prevent economic crimes.

Encouraging rehabilitation and support programs for individuals at risk of engaging in criminal activities due to economic conditions.

Promoting police officer training on preventing property crimes and their role during public health emergencies.

Declarations

Ethical approval

Not applicable

Funding

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The dataset used in this study is publicly available and can be accessed through the official website of the Kosovo Law Institute (Instituti i Kosovës për Drejtësi). The data were compiled and published by Gzime Hashani, a staff member of the Institute and the original author of the dataset. The dataset is accessible at the following link: <https://kllks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IKD-Kriminaliteti-n%C3%AB-pandemi-23.01.2021.pdf>

Data on international trends in property crime during the COVID-19 pandemic were obtained from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These data were compiled and made publicly available by UNODC as part of their efforts to monitor the global impact of the pandemic on crime patterns. The dataset provides comparative information from multiple countries and serves as a valuable source for understanding how property crime evolved during the pandemic period. The data are publicly accessible at the following link: <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/covid-19-propertycrime>

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