



# Research brief: What crime and helpline data say about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on reported violence against women and girls

## Introduction

Gender-based violence against women continues to be a significant public health concern and a human rights violation.<sup>1</sup> While women and girls are subjected to violence in both the public and private spheres, the latest edition of the *Global Study on Homicide*, published by UNODC in 2019, showed that the home continues to be the most dangerous place for them.<sup>2</sup>

In a relatively short time span, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has already had a tremendous impact on societies and economies worldwide, affecting almost every aspect of daily life. Since the onset of the pandemic, the idea that the lockdown measures introduced to restrict the spread of COVID-19 have increased gender-based and domestic violence against women and girls has become a common concern, including among United Nations agencies.<sup>3,4</sup> Restricted mobility has indeed kept women at home, increasing their risk of victimization by intimate partners or family members.

The aim of this research brief is to provide evidence that improves understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls, by focusing

on crime reported to authorities and incidents reported to helplines. The analysis covers data on violence against women and girls collected by UNODC during 2020 on victims of homicide by intimate partners, on victims of “femicide”, on sexual assault and rape reported to the authorities, and on calls made to helplines supporting victims of crime and women experiencing gender-based violence.

This assessment is based on a limited number of countries and – given the paucity of the data and the heterogeneity of emerging trends – it focuses on illustrative country examples without drawing conclusions on global trends or on the overall global impact of COVID-19 measures on the prevalence and reporting of violence against women. A comprehensive assessment of the overall impact of the pandemic can be made once more data become available on several types of crime that affect women, including lethal violence against women, such as gender-related killing of women and girls, also known as femicide. The hope is that the evidence presented in this brief, although limited, can be used to

<sup>1</sup> The forms of gender-based violence analysed in this research brief, for example, domestic violence and sexual violence, affect women and girls alike. Statistics published by criminal justice authorities and helpline services are not disaggregated by the age of the victim/caller, therefore the figures analysed do not enable a disaggregation of the percentage of victims under the age of 18.

<sup>2</sup> UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019: Gender-related Killing of Women and Girls* (Vienna, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, “Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women” (6 April 2020). The United Nations Secretary-General emphasized the

danger of increasing domestic violence during lockdown in a video message about gender-based violence and COVID-19 (5 April 2020). Available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-05/secretary-generals-video-message-gender-based-violence-and-covid-19-scroll-down-for-french>.

<sup>4</sup> UN Women, “Inter-agency statement on violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19” (June 2020). Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/statement-inter-agency-statement-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-context-of-covid-19>.

impartially assess current trends on reported gender-based violence against women and girls and to prioritize both national and international responses.

Lockdown measures can potentially affect violence against women in two conflicting ways:<sup>5</sup> by increasing strain in the home (as women spend more time in isolation with violent partners and family members they are more exposed to domestic violence); and by reducing exposure to crime committed outside the home (as social interaction is reduced, women have

less exposure to the interpersonal violence that affects them).<sup>6</sup>

The diversity of evidence arising from this research brief and other recent studies that have analysed the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women reflect the evolution of diverse crime trends as predicted in criminological theory. This is because that impact continues to be ambiguous, given that no significant, homogeneous effect on recorded incidents of crime across countries has been identified so far.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA USED IN THE ANALYSIS

The aim of this research brief is to present a concise assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls. The overall evidence on gender-based violence reported in this research brief is based on data collected from 34 countries across all regions (data on reported sexual violence from 26 countries, helpline data from 6 countries and data on gender-related killing of women and girls from 16 countries).

This assessment builds on information assembled by UNODC from:

- responses submitted to UNODC by Member States following a call for information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on crime;
- systematic analysis of open sources, official evidence and institutional reports;
- academic literature.

The analysis presented here should be viewed as a preliminary assessment of the impact on violence against women and girls of the COVID-19 pandemic and related confinement measures implemented by countries during the first half of 2020. While UNODC has presented and analysed the information available with rigour in order to avoid bias, timeliness has been prioritized over comprehensiveness and the information-base for the analysis remains limited and, in some cases, anecdotal.

The analysis presented in this research brief is based on administrative crime records and helpline statistics. These data have the advantage of being regularly available and comparable over time. However, with the exception of homicide data that can regularly describe the most extreme form of violence experienced by women, administrative records typically describe only the violence reported and not the full spectrum of violence experienced by women.<sup>a</sup> A significant share of violence against women is not reported for a variety of reasons, some of which may have been exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as fear of retaliation by the perpetrator, limited contact with informal support systems (friends and family members), restricted access to the police and other essential services because of confinement measures.

Challenges in collecting data on gender-based violence are generally very complex.<sup>b</sup> During the global pandemic and accompanying economic crisis, these complexities have been multiplied. The real extent of the impact of COVID-19 on domestic and gender-based violence requires long-term monitoring and can only be accurately assessed through surveys on victimization and violence against women. The data presented in this research brief should therefore be interpreted with caution and used as a call to be extra vigilant in order to identify obstacles to reporting and to ensure that potential cases of domestic and gender-based violence and intimate partner homicide continue to be prioritized by authorities.

<sup>a</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Violence Against Women: an EU-wide Survey. Results at a Glance* (2014, Luxembourg).

<sup>b</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, *Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence Against Women* (New York, 2014); Palermo, T., Bleck, J. and Peterman, A., "Tip of the iceberg: reporting and gender-based violence in developing countries", *American Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 179, No. 5 (March 2014), pp.602–612.

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see Eisner, M. and Nivette, A., "Violence and the pandemic, urgent questions for research" (New York, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, April 2020). Available at [www.hfg.org/Violence%20and%20the%20Pandemic.pdf](http://www.hfg.org/Violence%20and%20the%20Pandemic.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> For more information on criminological strain theory and opportunity theory, see UNODC, "Research Brief: Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on homicide and property crime" (forthcoming).



The reporting of rape and sexual assault to authorities decreased, suggesting a reduction in reporting violence to criminal justice institutions and a possible decrease in the number of incidents outside the domestic sphere. Reported violence reverted to previous levels once confinement measures were relaxed.



More women reached out to helplines. The increase in calls was greater where measures were more stringent. In a few countries no significant changes were noticeable in the number of women asking for help.

There was no notable change in the number of gender-related killings of women and girls in some countries, while in others there was a decrease. But the number of gender-related killings remained significant.



Overall, the impact varied across countries. Where changes were identifiable during lockdowns, the situation rapidly reverted to its alarming pre-pandemic level once measures were relaxed.



**Response:** It is crucial to ensure that services for survivors of gender-based violence against women, including those in the criminal justice system, are considered essential and remain operational with adequate resources.

## Key findings

The analysis of crime statistics recorded by national authorities and calls received by emergency helplines shown in this research brief present a diverse picture of trends. There was a clear decrease in sexual violence and rape reported to authorities and an increase in calls to helplines in some countries during lockdown.<sup>7</sup> However, in a small number of other countries, there were no significant changes or even a decrease in gender-related killings of women and girls, and no significant increase in the number of calls recorded by helplines.

More marked patterns were visible in sexual and domestic violence reported to the authorities and in calls made to helplines that assist women who experience violence. In some instances, when an increase in complaints about gender-based violence against women and domestic violence was recorded, the patterns seem to have returned to pre-lockdown levels after the first phase of restrictive measures, while the level of reported sexual violence increased once measures were relaxed.

Criminal justice data analysed in this research brief suggest there was a predominantly declining trend in the number of incidents of sexual assault and rape reported to and recorded by the authorities shortly after lockdown measures were implemented. This suggests that during restrictive measures there was a decrease in the accessibility of women to institutions for reporting incidents, the capacity of authorities to record those incidents and a possible decline in incidents outside the domestic sphere.

Consistent with overall homicide trends, killings of women by intimate partners, which constitute a sizeable share of gender-related killings, have shown diversified trends. Some countries recorded decreases immediately after the introduction of lockdown measures, with a return to pre-existing trends shortly afterwards, while no substantial changes were detected in others.

Some national helpline data depict a striking increase in reported violence against women. Most show some “bumps” after lockdown measures were introduced, but they disappeared shortly afterwards. Some data show changes within the range of the variability observed pre-pandemic.

In line with emerging academic literature, the evidence presented in this research brief refers to a limited number of countries and thus cannot provide a definitive answer as to how and in what ways lockdown measures may have had an impact on violence against women. The findings presented here should be interpreted in the context of factors that are known to have an effect on the prevalence and reporting of gender-based violence against women and girls, such as social isolation, loss of livelihood or earnings, and the level of control exercised by intimate partners.<sup>8</sup>

Only long-term monitoring and assessment will ascertain whether measures aimed at restricting the spread of COVID-19 have had an impact on the level of sexual and domestic violence in particular countries and globally. Changes in the number of recorded cases of violence observed during the lockdown require scrutiny in order to improve understanding of whether they reflect an actual change in that level of violence or simply in reporting and recording practices. It is also important to assess whether changes in the level of violence against women observed during and after the lockdown are significant in the context of the intrinsic variability of the data, in order to see if they are short-term or merely episodic changes.

## Policy and operational implications

- The findings presented in this research brief related to a decrease in reported sexual violence highlight the need to ensure that proper channels remain open for women to report violence during lockdowns. They also note the urgency to collect survey-based data that reflect the actual level of violence experienced by women during lockdowns. Only when survey and longer-term administrative data become available will it become possible for the full impact of the pandemic on violence against women and girls to be understood.
- Decreases in the number of cases reported to criminal justice authorities may reflect additional obstacles for women and girls in reporting incidents of violence and accessing criminal justice institutions and other essential

---

<sup>7</sup> The data shown in this brief are analysed in the context of the lockdown implemented by countries during the first half of 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g. UN Women and WHO, “Violence against women and girls Data collection during COVID-19” (April 2020). Available at

[www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/vawg-data-collection-during-covid-19-compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=2339](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/vawg-data-collection-during-covid-19-compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=2339).

services. Given that many of those obstacles may be exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial that criminal justice institutions identify and address them and ensure that potential cases of domestic and gender-based violence and intimate partner homicide continue to be prioritized. It is important to ensure that services for survivors are regarded as essential, remain open and are resourced and made accessible, especially to those most likely to be left behind.

- Criminal justice authorities are advised to remain vigilant and ready to respond to increased or evolving threats as mobility restrictions shift in response to the ever-changing landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Member States should prioritize essential services regardless of the availability of data, given the well-established needs of survivors and widespread prevalence of gender-based violence. This includes placing a high priority on police and justice responses, supporting health and social services, adopting preventive measures, and providing funding to women's rights organizations and other first responders.
- It is recommended that authorities collect and analyse real-time comprehensive and sex-disaggregated criminal justice data in order to obtain a robust, longitudinal assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on offences related to violence against women, including domestic and sexual violence. Just as each country has its own measures for containing the spread of the virus, it is likely that the crime pattern of each country will be affected by social mobility restrictions and the unique reaction of the population to those restrictions. This should be complemented with survey-based data on the prevalence of different forms of gender-based violence against women and qualitative data on the impact of COVID-19 on criminal justice responses to that type of violence. This

assessment will be crucial in developing targeted evidence-based policies for addressing violence against women, as crime patterns shift over time. Data collection efforts should prioritize the safety, privacy and confidentiality of women and girls, should be based on clear objectives and rationales and respect the principle of doing no harm.

- Prevention measures related to COVID-19, such as the closure of schools, limiting of non-essential commerce and keeping the population indoors, are likely to have a disproportionately negative impact on women.<sup>9</sup> Women are overwhelmingly the providers of informal care within families<sup>10</sup> and in many regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Southern Asia and Southern Africa, the share of women employed in the informal economy is larger than that of men.<sup>11</sup> The financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to be a gendered impact that will disproportionately affect women already working in the informal economy and living in poverty, and push an estimated 47 million women worldwide into extreme poverty.<sup>12</sup> This situation will expose women to a significant risk of gender-based violence and domestic abuse,<sup>13</sup> especially that perpetrated by intimate partners, and their precarious economic circumstances may make the obstacles that they encounter when reporting those crimes even harder to overcome.

---

<sup>9</sup> Wenham, C. et.al., "COVID-19, the gendered impacts of the outbreak", *The Lancet* (2020).

<sup>10</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean* (April 2020).

<sup>11</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Brief* (January 2019), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> UN Women, "From insight to action: gender equality in the wake of COVID-19" (2020).

<sup>13</sup> For further information about the intersection between gender-based violence against women and girls and poverty, see Modie-Moroka, T., "Intimate partner violence and poverty in the context of Botswana", *Journal of Psychology in Africa* (2014), vol. 20, No.2., pp. 185-191; Goodman, L. A. et.al., "When crises collide: how intimate partner violence and poverty intersect to shape women's mental health and coping", *Trauma Violence Abuse*, vol. 10, No.4 (2009), pp. 306-329.

## Sexual violence and domestic abuse as reported to national authorities

In countries with available data, a significant decrease in the number of cases of sexual violence reported to the authorities seems to have occurred during the early stages of the pandemic in March and April 2020 (figure 1). This may have been the result of two dynamics: an actual decrease in sexual violence (most probably outside the domestic sphere); and a decrease in the reporting of sexual violence to the authorities. A possible hypothesis is that the level of sexual violence originating outside the domestic sphere decreased as a result of lockdown measures that restricted social mobility and thus human interaction and the opportunity to commit certain types of crime, and that violent crime perpetrated outside the domestic sphere may have been similarly impacted (see figure 15 in the annex at the end of this document).

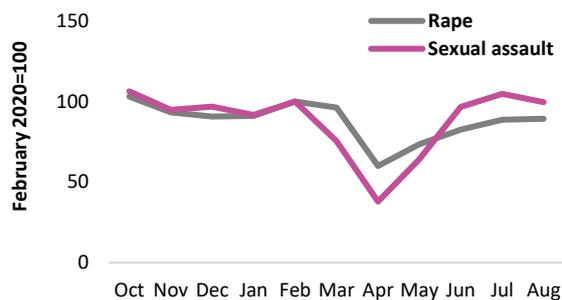
However, it is well documented that only a small share of sexual violence suffered by women is formally reported to law enforcement authorities<sup>14</sup> and it is likely that national lockdown measures limited the access of women to those reporting channels, with police, first responders and health services being overburdened and operating at limited capacity. As reported by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, courts in many countries were either closed or operating at reduced hours, leading to delays in processing cases, and cases referring to domestic violence were not usually prioritized.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, women may have been subjected to increasing levels of controlling behaviour by intimate partners during the confinement period and therefore had limited opportunities to reach out to support services and report incidents of abuse.

<sup>14</sup> For further information, see European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Violence Against Women: an EU-wide Survey. Results at a Glance* (Luxembourg, 2014), p.22.

<sup>15</sup> A/75/144 (July 2020), para. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Albania, China (Macao, Special Administrative Region), Chile, Croatia, Eswatini, Greece, Guatemala, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Mongolia, Myanmar, Namibia, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain and Uruguay.

**FIGURE 1** Trends in the number of rapes and sexual assaults recorded by national authorities, October 2019–August 2020

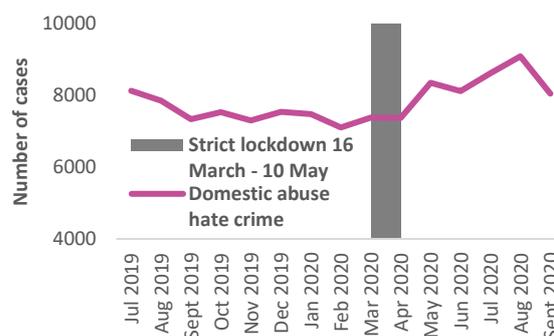


Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.

Note: Rape=21 countries,<sup>16</sup> Sexual assault=15 countries.<sup>17</sup>

Responses to a survey of domestic abuse survivors in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland indicate that women faced considerable challenges in accessing domestic abuse services and mental health support while lockdown measures were enforced, which exposed them to worsening domestic abuse.<sup>18</sup> As reported by UN Women, restricted mobility, economic insecurity, diminished financial income and looming unemployment represent barriers for women to report incidents of domestic violence, seek support and leave a home shared with an abusive partner.<sup>19</sup>

**FIGURE 2** Recorded incidents of domestic abuse hate crime in London, United Kingdom, July 2019–September 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the London Metropolitan police.

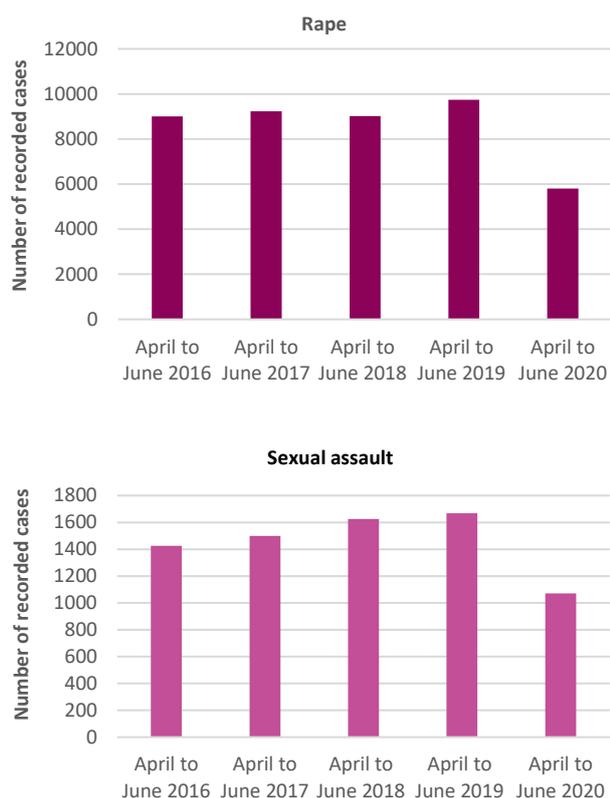
<sup>17</sup> Albania, China (Macao, Special Administrative Region), Croatia, Eswatini, Guatemala, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain and Uruguay.

<sup>18</sup> Davidge, S., *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting them* (Women's Aid Federation England, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> ONU Mujeres México, "COVID-19 y su impacto en la violencia contra las mujeres y niñas".

National data from South Africa on cases of sexual offences recorded from the beginning of April to the end of June over a period of five years show a significant decrease in 2020 (figure 3). Given that social confinement measures were introduced in that country on 23 March, the decrease registered in the key months in 2020 can be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdown.<sup>20</sup>

**FIGURE 3** Recorded cases of sexual offences in South Africa (1 April–30 June 2016–2020)

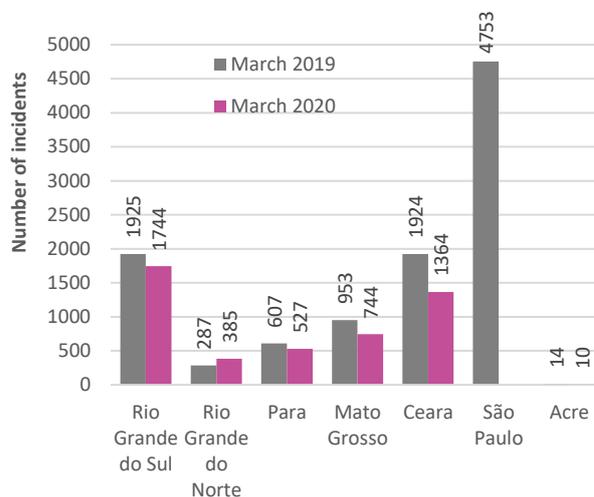


Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the South African police service.

Subnational data from Brazil on registered incidents of intentional bodily harm resulting from domestic violence in selected federal states also show a decrease in March 2020 compared with 2019 (figure 4). Only in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, where lockdown measures were introduced at the beginning of April,<sup>21</sup> was the number of registered incidents in 2020 higher than in 2019. While it is not possible to ascertain whether sexual violence and domestic violence against women actually increased or

decreased during the lockdown periods, these data pose questions about the possible challenges that women may have faced in accessing criminal justice institutions to report sexual and domestic violence during those periods.

**FIGURE 4** Registered incidents of intentional bodily harm resulting from domestic violence in selected federal states, Brazil, March 2019 and 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Secretarias Estaduais de Segurança Pública e/ou Defesa Social; Observatório de Análise Criminal do NAT/MPAC; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública.

Note: No data were available for São Paulo in 2020.

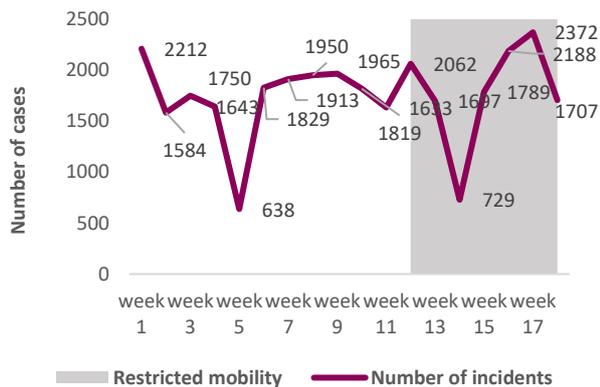
Data on recorded cases of domestic violence in Honduras disaggregated by week throughout the first four months of 2020 provide an example of the challenges involved in interpreting trends in the context of lockdown measures (figure 5). While there was a sharp decrease in the number of recorded cases three weeks after the introduction of lockdown measures, the range was within the variability observed in the early weeks of 2020, before the lockdown. This suggests that the decrease may have been due to pre-existing conditions that may have been exacerbated right after the introduction of the lockdown. As a matter of fact, on average, the number of cases of domestic violence reported in Honduras before and after the lockdown did not change significantly: the 1,792 cases reported weekly after the lockdown was only 4.1 per cent more than the 1,721 cases reported weekly before the lockdown.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> A significant share of sexual violence experienced by women in South Africa is not reported to authorities. A victimization survey conducted in the country's Gauteng Province in 2017 showed that only 1 in 23 women who experienced sexual violence reported it to the police. For further information see, Republic of South Africa, *National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide* (2020), p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, *Violência Doméstica Durante a Pandemia de COVID-19* (April 2020), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia, *Homicidios en el Contexto COVID-19 en Honduras*, Boletín especial No. 84 (May 2020).

**FIGURE 5** Registered weekly cases of domestic and intra-family violence in Honduras, weeks 1–18, January–April 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Sistema Nacional de Emergencias (911)/Instituto Nacional de la Mujer/Observatorio Nacional de la Violencia, UNAH, Honduras.

In India, data collected by the National Commission for Women show an increase in the amount of complaints received a few weeks after the lockdown began on 25 March 2020, compared with the period prior to the lockdown.<sup>23</sup> However, this change forms part of an erratic pattern observed in the past and it may mask the effect of government responses aimed at mitigating a possible increase in domestic violence after the lockdown. For example, an additional reporting channel was introduced shortly after the introduction of the lockdown to enable women to report complaints through WhatsApp chats.<sup>24</sup> This novel and highly accessible way of reporting violence may have increased the reporting of pre-existing cases.

In the months following the end of the lockdown, there was an increase in the number of complaints received in India, which was similar to the levels observed prior to the lockdown. Indeed, recent studies looking at the impact of lockdown measures on violence against women in India have found an initial decrease in recorded crimes in the first weeks after the introduction of those measures, followed by a subsequent increase, as the lockdown progressed.<sup>25</sup>

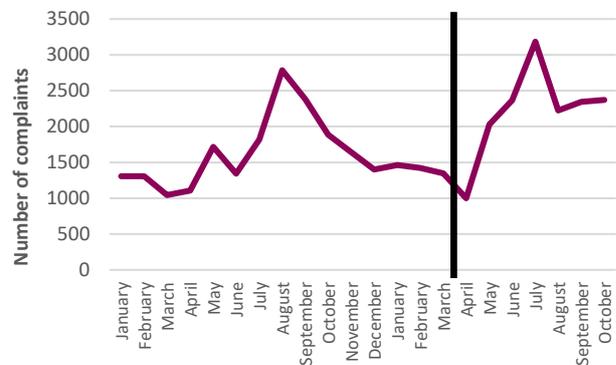
<sup>23</sup> The National Commission for Women is a statutory body in India tasked with advising the Government on policy matters concerning women and reviewing constitutional and legal safeguards affecting women in India. The commission processes complaints received orally or in writing through its website from women all over India. For further information, see: <http://ncw.nic.in/>.

<sup>24</sup> A new WhatsApp number was launched on 10 April 2020 to facilitate the reporting of cases of domestic violence through chats. Complaints were previously received by the National Commission of Women, both through an online portal and offline.

<sup>25</sup> Poblete-Cazenave, R., "The impact of lockdowns on crime and violence against women – evidence from India", SSRN paper (August

2020), p. 16. The study uses data on violence against women in India collected from the National Commission and police reports.

**FIGURE 6** Number of monthly complaints received by the National Commission for Women throughout January 2019 and October 2020, India



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data published in monthly newsletters from the National Commission for Women.

The fluctuating trends observed in the countries with available monthly data on reported incidents of sexual and domestic violence are consistent with research conducted in Texas, United States of America, which analysed the impact of the lockdown measures aimed at restricting the spread of COVID-19 on violence against women. No sustained and lasting increase in the level of domestic violence reported during and after stay-at-home orders was identified:<sup>27</sup> results showed an immediate increase in the first two weeks after the lockdown was introduced and a decrease in the weeks that followed. Another study, conducted in Queensland, Australia, which analysed the impact of confinement measures on reported rates of violent crime showed a significant decline in serious assault and sexual assault in April 2020, around a month after social distancing rules had been introduced in Queensland, and no change in the rate at which domestic violence orders were breached.<sup>28</sup>

2020), p. 16. The study uses data on violence against women in India collected from the National Commission and police reports.

<sup>26</sup> Ravindran, S. and Shah, M., "Unintended consequences of lockdowns: Covid-19 and the shadow pandemic", September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Piquero, A. R. et al., "Staying home, staying safe? A short-term analysis of COVID-19 on Dallas Domestic Violence", *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 45, (June 2020), pp. 601-635.

<sup>28</sup> Payne, J.L., et al., "COVID-19 and social distancing measures in Queensland, Australia, are associated with short-term decreases in recorded violent crime", *Journal of Experimental Criminology* (July 2020).

## Violence against women reported by national helplines

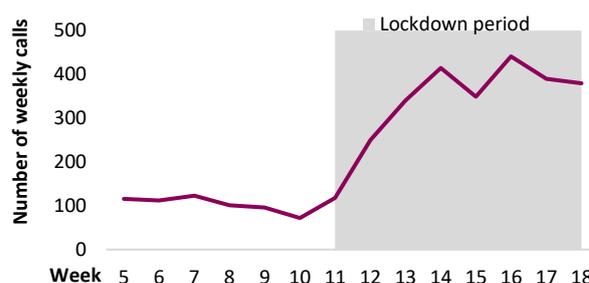
Data related to gender-based violence, including domestic violence and sexual violence, collected by UNODC from national hotline and helpline services in six countries, show more marked trends than those related to gender-related killing of women, although with some differences across countries.<sup>29</sup> Some countries, such as Italy, Peru and Spain, reported an increase in the number of calls and/or reports of domestic violence following the introduction of lockdown measures, while others, such as Denmark, recorded a slight decrease in the first three weeks of the lockdown and an increase afterwards.

The increase in the number of recorded calls by helpline services is consistent with the findings of reports by UN Women and other United Nations agencies showing that helplines in Cyprus, France, Singapore and Tunisia<sup>30</sup> registered an increase in domestic violence calls after confinement measures were introduced nationally.<sup>31</sup> This evidence is corroborated by recent studies that assessed the impact of COVID-19 and related lockdown measures on violence against women using call service data. The results of a study using data on the number of recorded calls received by police services in the United States, for example, found an increase of 7.5 per cent in the number of incidents of domestic violence reported in 14 large cities after social-distancing measures were introduced during March, April and May 2020.<sup>32</sup>

In Europe, the increase in the number of calls recorded by the national women's helpline in Italy, the first country to be severely affected by COVID-19, is particularly striking. On 9 March 2020 (week 11) the country went into a strict national quarantine banning all outdoor activities other than for essential

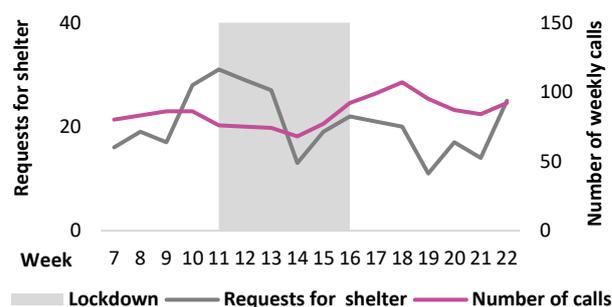
purposes such as grocery shopping. Data<sup>33</sup> collected by the national helpline show a very sudden spike in the number of calls from the first week of the quarantine (figure 7). Compared with the weeks immediately prior to the lockdown and with the same period in 2019, the number of calls by victims of violence in Italy increased by up to four times during the lockdown in the spring.

**FIGURE 7** Total number of calls to the national helpline for victims of gender-based violence and stalking, Italy, February–April 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT).

**FIGURE 8** Number of weekly calls received by the national hotline, Denmark, 10 February–31 May



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Lev Uden Vold (Live Without Violence), national hotline providing support to victims, perpetrators, family/friends and professionals.

The change in the number of calls registered by emergency helplines in Mexico and Argentina was less marked than in Italy.<sup>34</sup> In Mexico, a decrease in

<sup>29</sup> Women and girls alike are affected by gender-based violence. Statistics published by the helpline services analysed are not disaggregated by the age of callers; however, it is possible that some of the callers were minors. In many countries there are specialized protection services for children, including helplines that offer support to children affected by domestic and sexual violence.

<sup>30</sup> UN Women, "From insight to action: gender equality in the wake of COVID-19" (2020), p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women" (6 April 2020), p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Leslie, E., and Wilson, R., "Sheltering in place and domestic violence: evidence from calls for service during COVID-19", *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 189 (September 2020), p. 15.

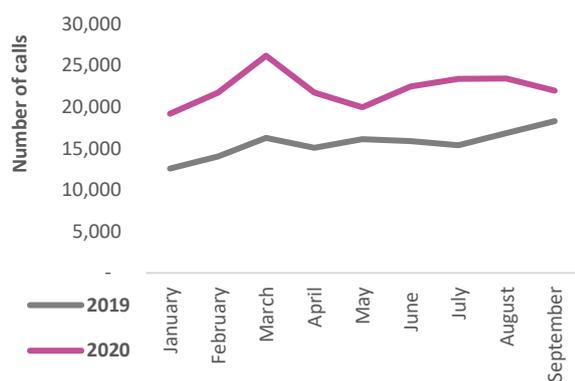
<sup>33</sup> Data refer to national helpline number 1522 promoted by the Presidency of the Council, Department for Equal Opportunities, Italy. The helpline received calls from both women and men affected by gender-based violence and stalking. The vast majority of callers are women.

<sup>34</sup> The emergency helpline in Mexico is a general emergency helpline, not a helpline specifically dedicated to supporting people affected by gender-based violence. The number of calls shown on the graph capture only emergencies related to violence against women. The emergency helpline in Argentina specializes in cases of gender-based violence. The number of calls is not disaggregated by the sex of the caller; however, in the vast majority of cases this concerns gender-based violence perpetrated by men (over 90 per cent), and 98 per cent of the callers are women. For further information, see:

the number of recorded calls received by the general emergency helpline was observed for two months after confinement measures were recommended by the Government at the end of March, but the overall trend returned immediately after that to the pattern recorded before the lockdown. In Argentina, a sudden increase in the volume of calls by women anticipating the implications of the imminent confinement measures was received by the helpline for victims of gender-based violence, which remained at a higher level than during the same period in 2019. The increase recorded in Argentina could be explained to some extent by confinement measures that were more stringent than those introduced in Mexico, and also because the helpline in Argentina is specifically dedicated to victims of gender-based violence. For a more detailed analysis of helpline data collected by UNODC, see the figures in the annex at the end of this document.

The above-mentioned data on calls received by gender-based violence helplines may also include calls referring to incidents of violence against children. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against children is not examined in this brief, but it should be noted that, as stressed by the United Nations Secretary-General<sup>35</sup> and the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence Against Children in its Agenda for Action,<sup>36</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the vulnerability of children to violence.

**FIGURE 9** Total number of calls related to incidents of violence against women received by the 911 helpline, Mexico, January to September 2019 and 2020

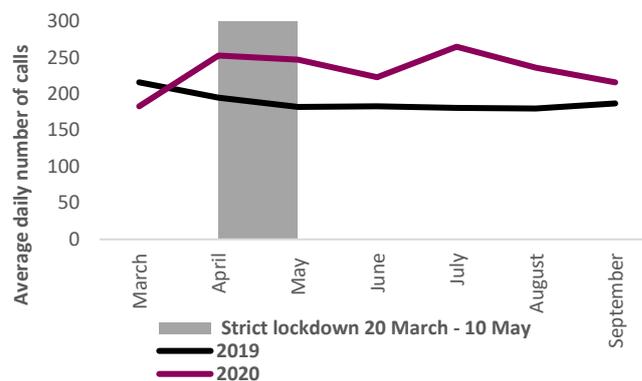


Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Secretariado ejecutivo del sistema nacional de seguridad pública, Mexico.

<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/generos/linea-144/informacion-estadistica>.

<sup>35</sup> For further information, see United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on children" (April 2020). Available at [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy\\_brief\\_on\\_covid\\_impact\\_on\\_children\\_16\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_children_16_april_2020.pdf)

**FIGURE 10** Average daily number of calls received by the gender-based violence 144 helpline, Argentina, March–September in 2019 and 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity, Argentina.

## Lethal violence against women

Rooted in unequal power relations between women and men, femicide, or the gender-related killing of women and girls, is generally regarded as the intentional killing of women perpetrated by men because of the gender roles assigned to women;<sup>37</sup> it covers killings perpetrated both inside and outside the domestic sphere. In many instances such killings represent the culmination of a continuum of (intimate partner) violence. As it results in a killing, lethal violence against women is less likely to be under-recorded by authorities than other forms of non-lethal victimization of women, which typically require victims to report the incident to the authorities. In some circumstances, depending on national legislation, when authorities lack sufficient capacity or information about the context of a killing to record the relationship between the victim and perpetrator of a homicide and the sex of the victim, the intentional homicide of a woman may not be formally categorized in administrative records as a gender-related killing/"femicide" or intimate partner homicide.

The scarcity of data on the gender-related killing of women and girls does not allow general conclusions to be drawn, but some available national data on the gender-related killing of women and girls collected

<sup>36</sup> Agenda for Action of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children (April 2020). Available at [https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal\\_justice/endVAC/Agenda\\_for\\_Action\\_UNIAWG-VAC.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/endVAC/Agenda_for_Action_UNIAWG-VAC.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019: Gender-related Killing of Women and Girls* (Vienna, 2019).

during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic can offer illustrative examples of the heterogeneous impact that lockdown measures have had on those crimes. The trends in “femicide” observed in Mexico and Brazil are illustrative of the diverse developments that emerged in different countries as a result of the confinement measures implemented.

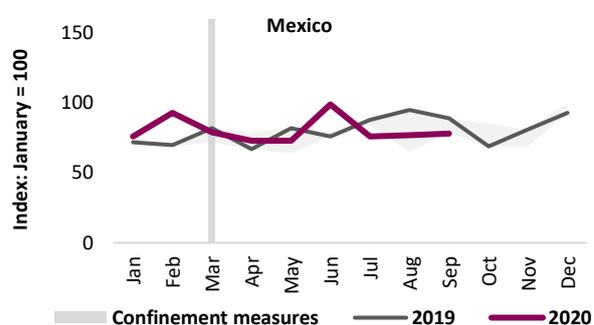
The number of alleged “femicide”<sup>38, 39</sup> victims recorded across all the federal states of Mexico from January to September 2020 showed a drop in May and an increase in June (figure 11). This suggests that the restrictive measures aimed at restricting the spread of COVID-19 may have led to a decrease in lethal violence against women in the first phase following the introduction of the measures and to a slight increase once they were relaxed. This fluctuation resembles the variability observed in the past.<sup>40</sup>

In Brazil, the evidence paints a different picture. The comparison of subnational data on “femicide”, as defined by national legislation in Brazil,<sup>41</sup> between the first three months of 2019 and 2020 (figure 12), suggests that the confinement measures implemented during the first three months of 2020 were associated with a slight increase in the number of victims. While this increases across all the states analysed, the significant variation in the percentage increase and the small number of cases make it difficult to argue that this was directly related to the confinement measures exacerbating the vulnerability of women living in situations of domestic violence.<sup>42</sup> Additional data on the number of “femicide” cases recorded in 12 federal states in Brazil from March to May in 2019 and 2020 show an overall increase in “femicide” cases in 2020 of 2.2 per cent compared with the previous year<sup>43</sup> (see figure 17 in the annex at the end of this document), with significant variability in the percentage increase between states and monthly in all 12 states: compared with the same month in 2019, in March 2020 there was an increase

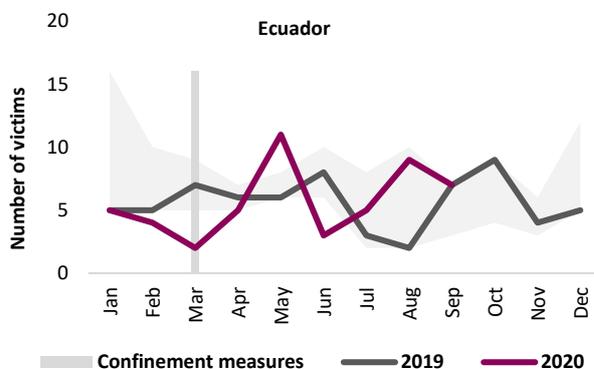
of 38.9 per cent, in April 2020 an increase of 3.2 per cent and in May 2020 a decrease of 27.9 per cent.

Available monthly data on the number of “femicide” victims in Peru and Ecuador suggest a decrease in March shortly after confinement measures were introduced. In Ecuador, the decrease was short-lived, as by May the number of victims had already increased to pre-pandemic levels. In Peru, the decrease seems to have been more long-lasting, as the monthly number of victims between April and August 2020 was slightly lower than pre-pandemic levels.

**FIGURE 11** Trends in the number of “femicide” victims in Mexico, Ecuador, El Salvador and Peru, 2017–2020



Source: UNODC elaborated with data from Secretariado ejecutivo del sistema nacional de seguridad pública, Mexico.



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Ministry of Interior. Note: The lockdown was introduced in Ecuador on 12 March 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Gender-related killings of women and girls are criminalized in Mexico and Brazil as a separate criminal offence. Data on such crimes are collected in those countries according to the definition provided by national legislation.

<sup>39</sup> There are several laws that criminalize “femicide” in Mexico: Reform of article 325 of the Federal Criminal Code, Decree amending article 11 of the General Law for Women’s Access to a Life Free from Violence, the Organic Law of Federal Public Administration and the Organic Law of the Attorney General’s Office. For further information, see <https://oig.cepal.org/es/laws/1/country/mexico-16>.

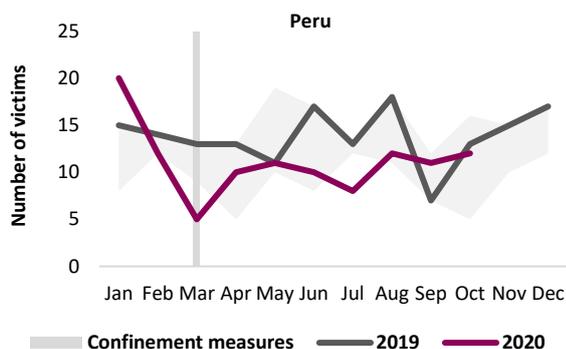
<sup>40</sup> The federal states of Mexico have different legal definitions of “femicide” whereas Brazil has just one applied across all its federal states. These two countries were included in the analysis on the basis

of data availability. Authorities in both countries did not impose a strict, nationwide lockdown in the spring of 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Law 11.340, adopted in 2016, also known as *Law Maria da Penha*. For further information, see <https://www.cnj.jus.br/lei-maria-da-penha/>. The law criminalizes cases of gender-related killing of women and girls perpetrated both within and outside the domestic sphere.

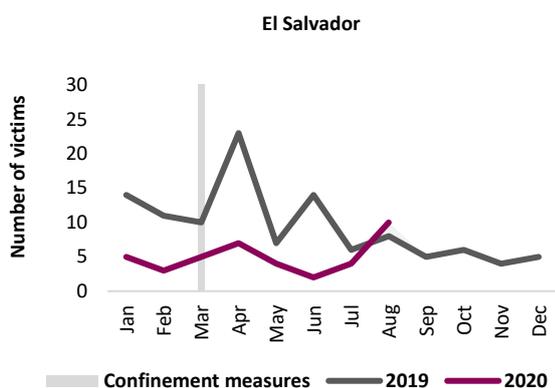
<sup>42</sup> Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, *Violência Doméstica Durante a Pandemia de COVID-19* (April 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, *Violência Doméstica Durante a Pandemia de COVID-19*, third edition (July 2020).



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Ministry of Public Affairs, National Prosecutor's Office.

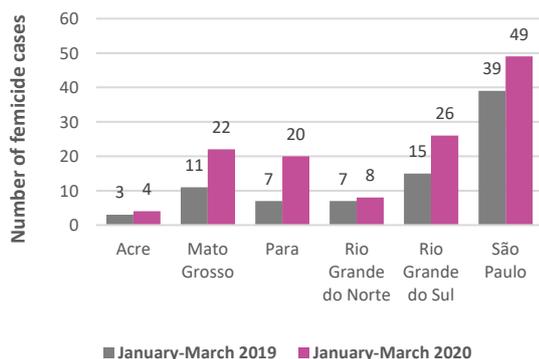
Note: The initial lockdown was introduced in Peru on 15 March 2020 and lasted until 10 May 2020.



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, EL Salvador.

Note: The numbers cover homologated crimes. The national lockdown in El Salvador was introduced on 21 March 2020. The relaxation of lockdown measures started on 16 June and lasted until 7 of July.

**FIGURE 12** Recorded "femicide" cases in selected federal states, Brazil (January–March 2019 and 2020)



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Secretarias Estaduais de Segurança Pública e/ou Defesa Social; Observatório de Análise Criminal do NAT/MPAC; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública.

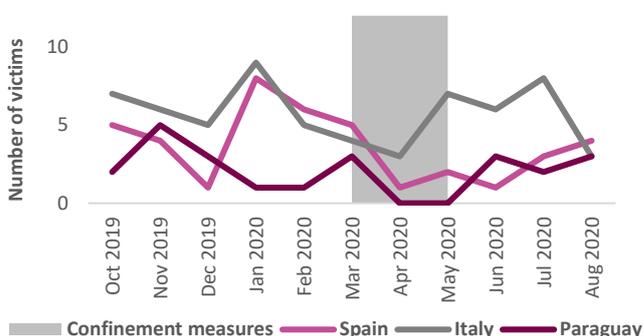
Data from 11 countries on the killing of women by intimate partners also show inconclusive trends. As in the case of homicide in general,<sup>44</sup> some changes could be observed shortly after the introduction of lockdown measures. The changes were either within the range of the previously observed variability or they were only significant during the initial 1–2 months after restrictive measures were put in place. Short-term changes observed after the lockdowns ended also diverged, with countries such as Spain recording decreases, countries such as Italy recording minor increases and countries such as Paraguay recording no change. These trends rapidly returned to the pre-existing patterns, however. A comprehensive assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the gender-related killings of women and girls will not be feasible until the end of 2021.

**FIGURE 13** Total number of monthly victims of intimate partner homicide, by sex,<sup>45</sup> selected countries with available data, October 2019–August 2020



Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.

**FIGURE 14** Number of female victims of intimate partner homicide, October 2019–August 2020, Italy, Paraguay and Spain



Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.

<sup>44</sup> UNODC, "Research Brief: Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on homicide and property crime" (forthcoming).

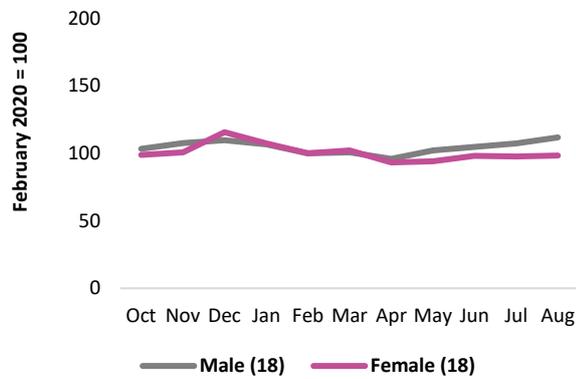
<sup>45</sup> The 11 countries are: Colombia, Croatia, Eswatini, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Paraguay, Slovenia, Spain. These countries

introduced confinement measures related to the spread of COVID-19 at different times in the spring of 2020 and with varying levels of stringency.

# Annex

## Violence against women

**FIGURE 15** Trends in the number of intentional homicide victims, by sex, 18 countries with available data, October 2019–August 2020



Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs

Note: The trend is calculated based on the total number of homicide victims in 18 countries for which data were available.<sup>46</sup> The base month is February 2020 = 100. A value of less than 100 indicates that the total number of victims in that month was lower than in February 2020. A value of more than 100 indicates that the total number of victims in that month was higher than in February 2020.

**FIGURE 16** Trends in the number of victims of gender-related killings,<sup>47</sup> Spain, Yearly total and from January to September, 2010–2020

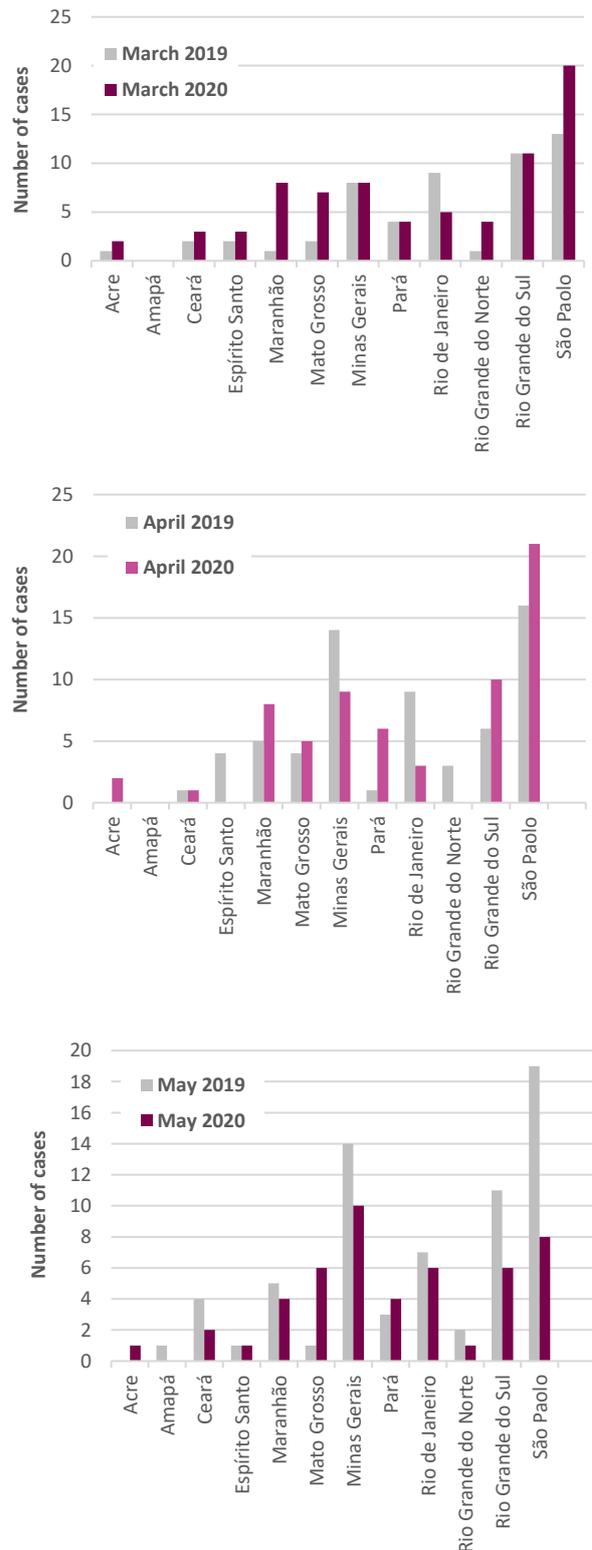


Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Government Office against Gender-based Violence.

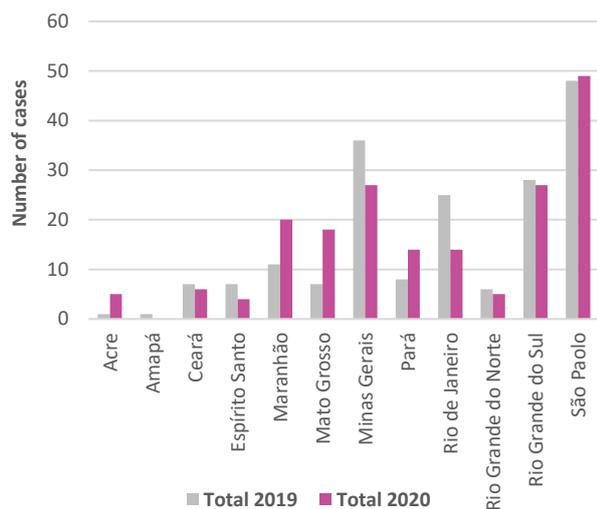
Note: The total number of victims is not yet available for 2020.

<sup>46</sup> The following countries are included: Albania, Colombia, Croatia, Eswatini, Greece, Guatemala, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mongolia, Myanmar, Namibia, Slovenia, Spain, Uruguay, Mexico, El Salvador and Chile.

**FIGURE 17** Number of monthly cases of “femicide” in selected federal states with available data, Brazil, March–May 2019 and 2020



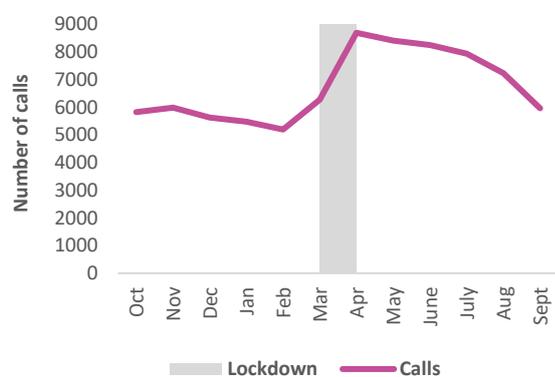
<sup>47</sup> According to Organic Law 1/2004, the number of victims of gender-related killing refers to women killed by current or former intimate partners.



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Secretarias Estaduais de Segurança Pública e/ou Defesa Social; Observatório de Análise Criminal do NAT/MPAC; Instituto de Segurança Pública do Rio de Janeiro; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública.

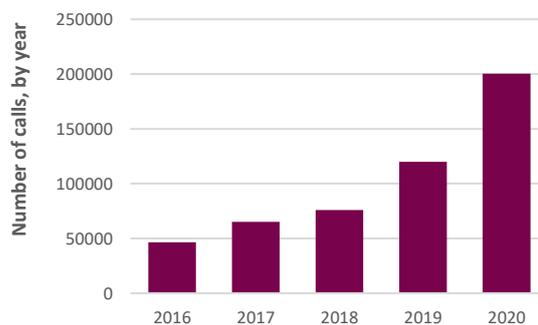
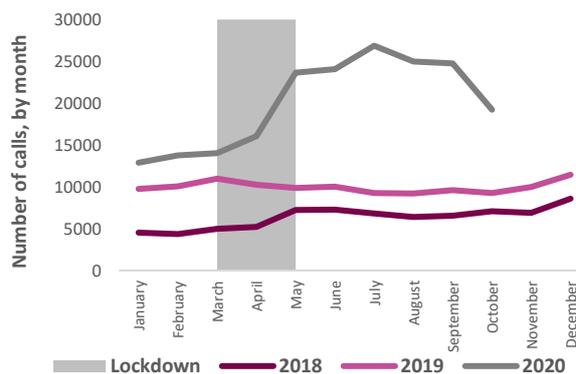
Note: The figures for April (2019 and 2020) in the state of Maranhão only cover the first 17 days of the month.

**FIGURE 18** Number of monthly calls received by the national women’s helpline, Spain, October 2019–September 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the Government Office against Gender-based Violence, Spain.

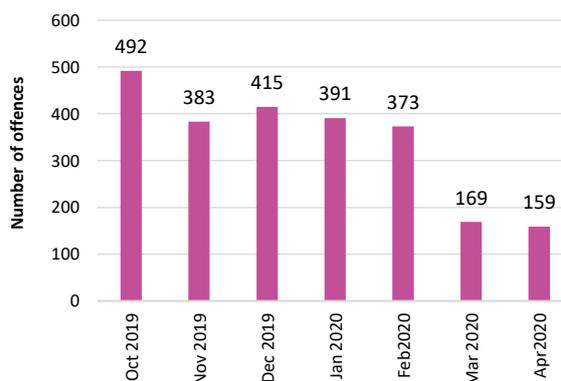
**FIGURE 19** Number of monthly calls received by the national helpline for victims of domestic and sexual violence, Peru



Source: Calls received by the helpline 100; UNODC, elaborated with data from the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations, Peru.

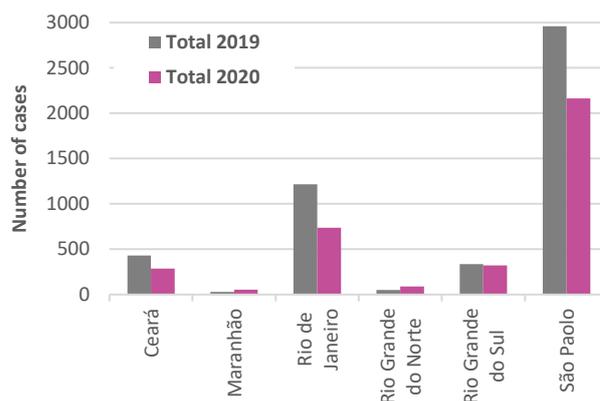
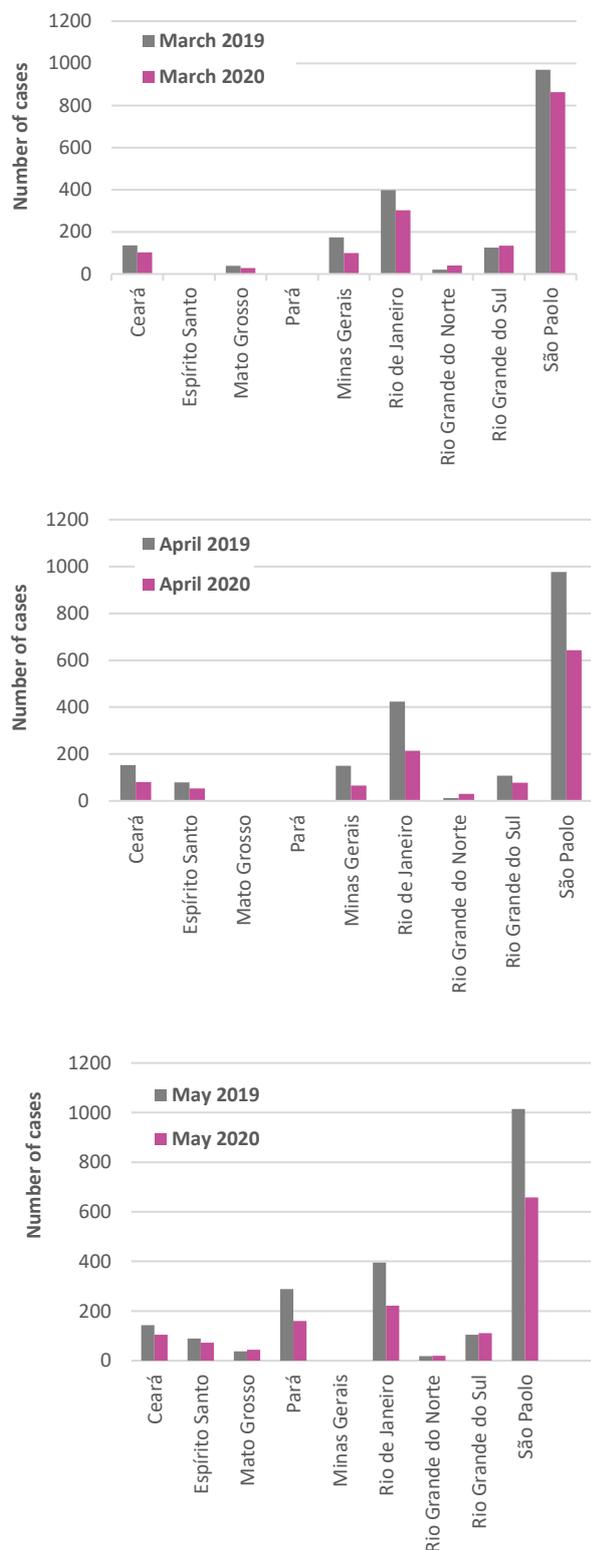
Note: The helpline provides support to victims of family and sexual violence. The annual number of calls in 2020 covers the period from January to October 2020. The initial lockdown was introduced in Peru on 15 March 2020 and lasted until 10 May 2020.

**FIGURE 20** Sexual violence, number of offences recorded by national authorities, Italy, October 2019–April 2020



Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.

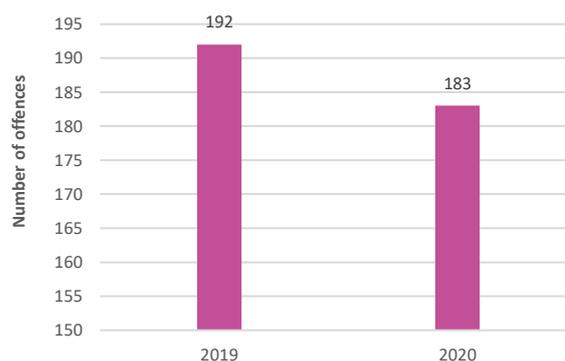
**FIGURE 21** Recorded cases of rape and rape of the vulnerable<sup>48</sup> in selected federal states with available data, Brazil, March–May 2019 and 2020



Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Secretarias Estaduais de Segurança Pública e/ou Defesa Social; Instituto de Segurança Pública do Rio de Janeiro; Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública.

Note: The figures for Minas Gerais include the offences of attempted and consummated rape and rape of the vulnerable.

**FIGURE 22** Number of offences of rape and sexual assault involving a knife recorded by the police, United Kingdom, England and Wales, April–June 2019 and 2020



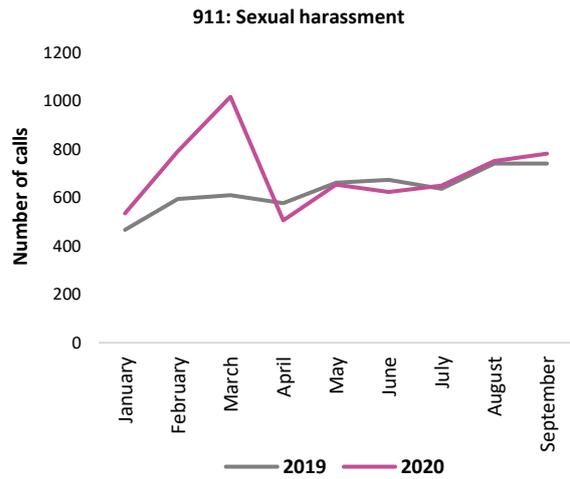
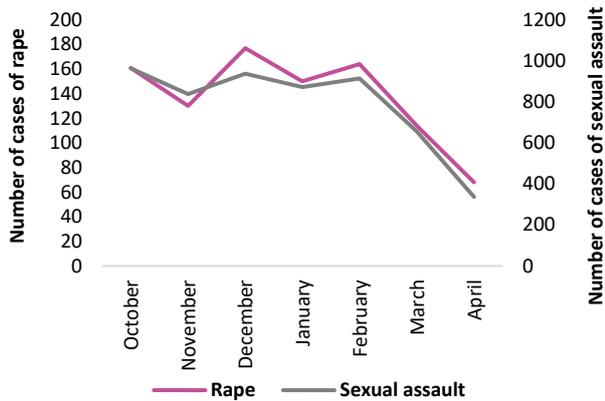
Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from the United Kingdom Home Office.

Note: Note: Sexual assault includes indecent assault on a male/female and sexual assault on a male/female (all ages). Offences involving a knife refers to the use of a knife or sharp instrument.

<sup>48</sup> Under Brazilian law, rape of the vulnerable is a criminal offence established by Law 12015 as of August 2009, which made an amendment to the Penal Code by introducing article 217-A and

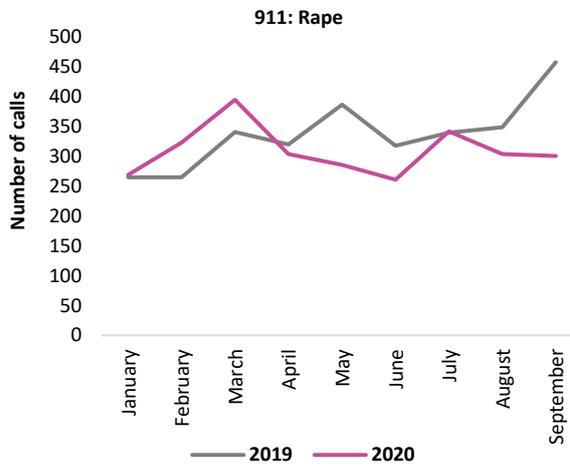
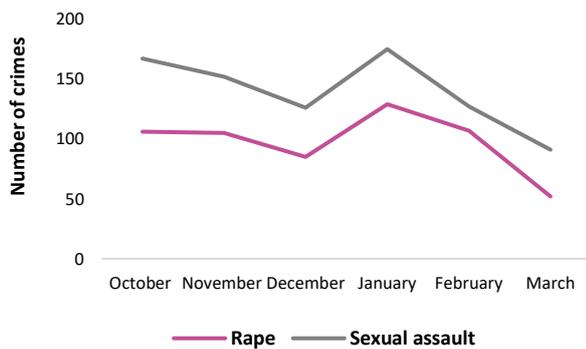
replacing article 224, which dealt with the presumption of violence. The term “vulnerable” refers to minors aged 12–14 years.

**FIGURE 23** Number of criminal offences recorded by the police, Spain, October 2019–April 2020



Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.

**FIGURE 24** Number of crimes recorded by the police, Denmark, October 2019–March 2020

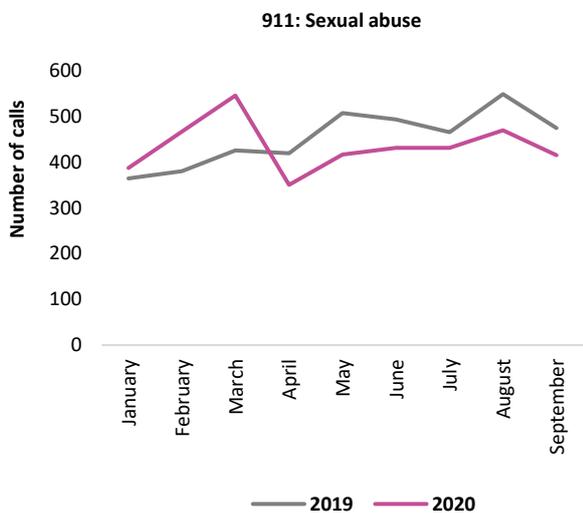


Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.

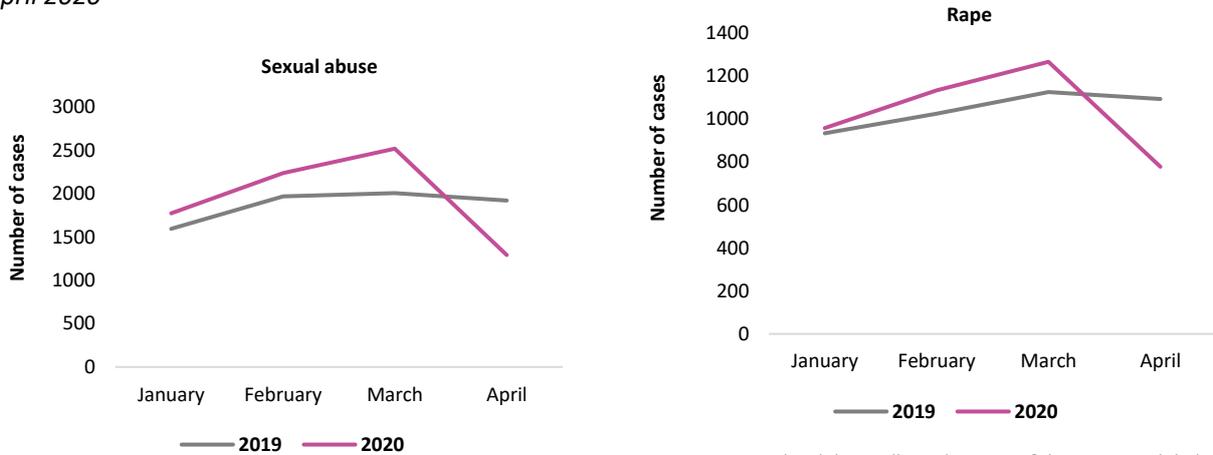
Source: UNODC, elaborated with data from Secretariado ejecutivo del sistema nacional de seguridad pública, Mexico.

Note: The number of calls is not disaggregated by the sex of the callers.

**FIGURE 25** Number of calls to the 911 emergency helpline, Mexico, January–September 2020



**FIGURE 26** *Number of crimes for which a formal criminal proceeding was initiated, Mexico, January–April 2020*



Source: Country-level data collected as part of the UNODC Global initiative to improve knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on crime and drugs.