



Misdemeanor Crime Rates in the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Race and Gender in Alachua County, Florida

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Abstract

Declared a national emergency on March 1, 2020, the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has caused a major change in everyday life and crime statistics across the United States (U.S.). The research in this study aims to assess changes in reported misdemeanor crimes in Alachua County, Florida, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as changes in the rate of misdemeanor crimes committed by certain gender and race demographics. Data from January 2019 to December 2020 was collected from the Alachua County Clerk of Circuit Court's On-Line Court Records and Document Images Access Page. The results of this study were consistent with the researcher's hypothesis that the number of overall misdemeanor cases filed would substantially increase regardless of race or gender, likely as a result of social disorganization and community unrest. However, the additional hypothesis that women and Black people would be seen committing higher rates of misdemeanor crimes in 2020 due to gender inequality and racial biases was rejected, with the data showing no statistical significance in the change in the number of cases filed for these populations. A potential explanatory factor for these findings is an overcommitment of responsibilities put upon women and girls, and a fear of racial prejudice and lack of social unity amongst Black people. These findings are important to highlight latent functions of state ordinances enacted to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and to spotlight necessary crime control and reduction techniques that must be implemented to adapt to the "new normal."

Keywords: COVID-19, Crime, Misdemeanor Crime, Race, Gender, Inequality

Purpose and Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken the lives of over half a million Americans and infected over 33 million as of June 10, 2021 ("Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," 2021). In an attempt to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 and prevent its spread, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the state of Florida implemented social distancing and stay-at-home orders, among other safety measures. With 87% of the world's children forced into virtual school and job loss rampant across the globe, social unrest and financial uncertainty are only some of the latent functions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Morse & Anderson, 2020). Such guidelines have negatively altered the lives of community members, such as parents who no

longer have daycare for their now homeschooled children, children who rely on school lunch for daily meals, businesses that are forced to lay off workers due to insufficient funds as a result of city-wide lockdowns, and family members who lost loved ones due to the virus.

Gender equality is an area not commonly prioritized when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Americans. Referred to as the “shadow pandemic” due to its hidden but dangerous consequences, women are especially disadvantaged by the pandemic as unemployment is rampant amongst lower-paying jobs, which are predominantly occupied by women (“Women in Healthcare: Quick Take,” 2020). Women are also subjected to excessive exposure to COVID-19 due to a lack of available and properly fitted personal protective equipment (PPE), despite women making up three-quarters of healthcare workers in the United States (“Women in Healthcare: Quick Take,” 2020). The CDC also reported that 73% of healthcare workers who tested positive for COVID-19 in the United States as of April 2020 were women (“Women in Healthcare: Quick Take,” 2020). At home, women and girls are frequently forced into dangerous situations by being sheltered-in-place with their abusers. Such abuse, as well as women being overworked with household responsibilities, can interfere with girls’ education and mothers’ abilities to work outside the home and financially provide for their families (Morse & Anderson, 2020).

Black people also face unique impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic such as biases in medical treatments, racism in the medical field, and a community distrust in the health care system, which has contributed to a death toll six times larger for Black people than that of White people (“Impact of COVID-19 on minoritized and marginalized communities,” 2020). Another factor leading to increased mortality rates amongst Black people is chronic stress associated with police-based trauma, which has been known to exacerbate conditions such as asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and mental health issues (Natividad, 2020). Even safety precautions such as wearing a mask to prevent the spread of the virus endanger dark-skinned people, who rely on uber-friendly facial expressions to calm negative assumptions from police and society that are derived from criminal-like stereotypes of Black people (Natividad, 2020).

This study expects to find an increase in overall misdemeanor crime rates from January 2019 to December 2020 as a result of the social disorganization associated with the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, misdemeanor crimes committed by women and Black people are expected to increase due to an increase in gender inequality and racial biases

following the pandemic. This study aims to highlight how societal disadvantages people face are exacerbated in times of unpredictable circumstances such as global health pandemics and are directly linked to increased community degradation and crime rates. Politicians, hospitals, and police departments in Alachua County, and counties of similar size and demographics, can benefit from this information to improve relations between their institutions and community members, and work cohesively to stabilize and reduce increasing crime rates.

Literature Review

Considering the recency of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was much more literature on COVID-19 and crime than expected. However, most information was focused on major U.S. cities with little information about counties and rural populations. This discrepancy in data was specified by John H. Boman IV and Owen Gallupe who emphasized the need for data on small and medium-sized areas (Boman & Gallupe, 2020). The data in this study specifically addresses this lapse in research by providing information on Alachua County, which contains nine municipalities and is ranked 23rd largest out of Florida's 67 counties, categorizing it in the lower half in population size in Florida ("Alachua County, Florida Towns and Cities," 2021).

Unlike the data in this study which assessed crime patterns by looking at filed crime records, both Boman and Gallupe's research and research by Mohler et al. looked at the volume and trends of calls-for-service in its studied areas. Like many others, Mohler's study focused on the impact of specific crimes such as burglary and vandalism which have statistically declined, while crimes such as domestic violence are statistically higher than normal. Lower traffic stops due to lower volumes of traffic were also seen as expected due to stay-at-home orders (Mohler et al, p. 2, 2020).

However, these results were not consistent throughout research studies. Ben Stickle and Marcus Felson found that while overall crime rates did show a significant decrease in the prevalence of robbery, shoplifting, theft, and battery, other crime rates such as domestic violence, vehicle theft, burglary, and homicides were unchanged (Stickle & Felson, 2020). Specifics of certain crimes should also be looked at, such as whether theft is decreasing amongst essential stores that remain open, or only those that closed due to lockdown orders (Stickle & Felson, 2020). Overall, it can be determined that while slight changes to crime patterns have been seen, the data is too inconsistent to make substantial conclusions regarding the impact of the pandemic on crime and disorder as a whole. The research in this study offers a new

perspective of changes in crime, looking at its effect on gender and race rather than crime types in a specific location.

Study Design and Execution

Alachua County court records are available to the public via the Clerk of the Circuit Court On-Line Information Center. The filed misdemeanor crimes from January 2019 to December 2020 were sourced based on the date the case was filed. All data in this study is based on individual case files and does not account for multiple misdemeanor charges within each case. This time frame was chosen since the COVID-19 pandemic was first detected in Florida on March 1, 2020, in Hillsborough County, which is 129.4 miles away from Alachua County (Cutway, 2020). Due to the first COVID-19 case being detected in Florida in March 2020, the information for January 2020 and February 2020 will act as a baseline for pre-pandemic patterns. Two-sample t-tests were used to determine the statistical significance of the crime data found before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Total Number of Misdemeanor Cases Filed

Month	2019	2020
January	40	47
February	32	45
March	33	66
April	35	56
May	36	109
June	26	60
July	50	67
August	41	70
September	53	78
October	45	82

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November	47	80
December	48	108

Note. All data is sourced from the Alachua County Clerk of Circuit Court’s On-Line Court Records and Document Images Access Page.

Table 2. Gender of Defendants in Filed Misdemeanor Cases, 2019 and 2020

Month	2019		2020	
	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)
January	41	59	13	87
February	32.3	67.7	36.4	63.6
March	32.3	67.7	18.5*	80*
April	35.3	64.7	34.5	65.5
May	42.9	57.1	35.2	64.8
June	32	68	23.7	76.3
July	40.8	59.2	36.4	63.6
August	27.5	72.5	23.2	76.8
September	26.9	73.1	29.9	70.1
October	9.1	90.9	33.3	66.7
November	21.7	78.3	26.6	73.4
December	38.3	61.7	32.7	67.3

Note. All data is sourced from the Alachua County Clerk of Circuit Court’s On-Line Court Records and Document Images Access Page. Please note the ^(a) to represent the remaining 1.5% filed as N/A.

Table 3. Race of Defendants in Filed Misdemeanor Cases, 2019 and 2020

Month	2019			2020		
	White (%)	Black (%)	Other (%)	White (%)	Black (%)	Other (%)
January	53.8	46.2	0	54.3	45.7	0
February	58.1	41.9	0	50	47.7	2.3
March	48.4	51.6	0	38.5	60	1.5
April	64.7	35.3	0	34.5	63.6	1.8
May	42.9	57.1	0	47.2	52.8	0
June	48	52	0	54.2	44.1	1.7
July	49	51	0	39.4	57.6	3
August	60	40	0	46.4	49.3	4.2
September	46.2	53.8	0	46.8	50.6	2.6
October	54.5	45.5	0	56.8	43.2	0
November	37	63	0	49.4	50.6	0
December	51.1	48.9	0	57	43	0

Note. All data is sourced from the Alachua County Clerk of Circuit Court’s On-Line Court Records and Document Images Access Page. The “Other” criterion field contains Asian, Oriental/Asian, White/Black, and NA/Unknown identification.

Analysis and Interpretations

Table 1 shown above chronicles the total number of misdemeanor cases filed in Alachua County from January 2019 to December 2020. The data in this table shows a consistent increase in the number of misdemeanor cases filed in 2020 compared to 2019 as a whole, as well as when paralleling each month to its consecutive year. As seen in Table 1, the average number of cases filed during the first 14 months before COVID-19 was detected in Florida is 41.3 per month. This average rises to 77.6 cases per month in the following 10 months recorded. The t-test conducted indicates that the null hypothesis, which says that the means of both years (2019 and 2020) are the same, is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, which says that the mean

cases during the pandemic are higher. There is over 99.99% confidence in this assertion, or less than a 0.01% chance that this observed pattern is due to chance.

Looking at January and February as our baseline data, a percent increase of 17.5% cases filed in January and 40.625% cases filed in February is still seen from 2019 to 2020 despite the COVID-19 pandemic not yet being in Florida. The most dramatic increase in misdemeanor crimes filed occurs within May and December, with misdemeanor crime rates approximately tripling. A potential reason for this is a change in socialization patterns which consist of norms and customs taught and enforced through everyday interactions no longer being present, resulting in a deconstruction of societal norms and self-control behavior (Akers et al., 2017). Due to the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, anomie and strain were also highly present amongst society during these times. Anomie, or “a state of normlessness or lack of social regulation in modern society,” is detrimental to society as it promotes rates of suicide and deviant behavior or crime (Akers et al., 2017). The statistical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been shown to align with Robert Merton’s interpretation of anomie as COVID-19 has called for a major disruption to typical patterns of behavior in society.

As seen in Table 2, the percentage of misdemeanor crimes committed by men is consistently greater in both 2019 and 2020. However, the average difference in crimes committed by men compared to women is 5.99% less in 2019 than in 2020, with an average of 36.65% in 2019, and 42.64% in 2020. When conducting a two-sample t-test, the hypothesis that women would be seen committing more misdemeanor crimes than the year prior is rejected due to a p-value greater than 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no correlation between gender and increasing misdemeanor crime rates is favored. This is consistent for males as the t-test showed no statistical significance in the change in crime rates amongst males.

From a sociological standpoint, a limitation is found in the court records’ classification of gender rather than sex. According to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, gender is a socially constructed identification of expression positioned on a continuum and changing perception of self (Government of Canada, 2020). Due to the assignment of “gender” classified by the arresting officer’s observation, this data shows room for error as genders such as nonbinary, agender, and pangender are not accounted for. It can be inferred that the database expresses this category based on the defendant’s sex, or their biological categorization as female or male based on identification records claimed at the point of the arrest, or the offender’s

physical appearance. An alternative and more accurate way to identify gender in these cases is through a self-identification method where the offender has the opportunity to disclose their gender identity.

Table 3 pictured above depicts the race of the defendants in misdemeanor cases filed in Alachua County in 2019 and 2020. The listed races in the case files are based on the discretion of the arresting officer, a flawed concept due to race being a biological foundation passed down through generations. While manifested through physical and some behavioral phenotypes, someone's race cannot be accurately identified by a third party (James & Burgos, 2020). Such assumptions have historically led to discriminatory practices and negative stereotypes and as seen in Table 3, is perpetuated by the current practice of race identification in the first stages of the criminal justice system. This is specifically seen in the lack of diversity in listed races, with the vast majority of races being Black or White.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, people of White (not Hispanic or Latino) and Black racial origins make up 81.2% of the population in Alachua County, while other races such as Hispanic or Latino (10.5%) and Asian (6.2%) make up the rest of the majority of the population. While making up a total of 0.5% of the population of Alachua County on July 1, 2019, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hawaiian Native, and other Pacific Islander races were not listed as a defendant's race once during the measured time span (Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2019). Since it is unlikely that no members of these demographic groups refrained from committing any crime during this time frame, it is probable that there are inaccuracies in the methods used by officers to accurately identify offenders' races.

Looking at our baseline January and February months, there is relatively little difference between the percentages of Black and White defendants in 2019 and 2020. This is maintained throughout the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic as there is no statistical significance proving an increase or decrease in Black or White offenders. However, a two-sample t-test did reveal a statistically significant increase in non-Black or White offenders since the onset of the pandemic. The results of these findings indicate that while to different extents, the COVID-19 pandemic has been shown to infect and affect everyone regardless of race and gender.

An external factor that could have interfered with any foreseeable patterns is the heightened awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement in June 2020 after the murder of George Floyd by former police officer, Derek Chauvin. The Black Lives Matter movement advocates for an

end to racial injustices such as police brutality and calls for an increase in accountability for offenders of hate crimes. As a result of nationwide protests and community pressures, police departments have become hypersensitive to racial issues and biased interactions with Black people than years prior. Just one protest in Gainesville, Florida, located in Alachua County on June 13, 2020, attracted over a thousand people of color and non-people of color alike to march for black lives, chanting phrases such as “I can’t breathe” and “Black lives matter” (Fludd & Rowe, 2020). Empirical data on this matter can vary depending on the city and population size, with polls finding that up to 26 million people across the U.S. participated in protests against racism and police violence (Buchanan et al., 2020). Additionally, accusations that Black Lives Matter protests provoked more violence by Black people proved to be false in Alachua County by the dating showing no statistical increase in Black offenders during this time.

Conclusion

In an attempt to look at the latent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on societal factors such as misdemeanor crime rates, it was found that there was a stark increase in misdemeanor cases filed in the first year of the pandemic, with total filed misdemeanor crimes nearly doubling in most months, and even tripling in others. The additional hypotheses of this study were found null as no clear pattern was found in an increase in misdemeanor cases in Alachua County by any particular gender or racial demographic group. These findings were surprising due to research showing a positive correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened gender inequality in homes, the economy, and health care systems (Morse & Anderson, 2020). Additionally, it was expected that the occurrence of Black offenders would be more prevalent due to the unique effects inflicted by the pandemic on the Black population. Due to race and gender proving to not be associated with the increase in misdemeanor cases filed in Alachua County, further research must be conducted to account for this change.

Limitations to this research can be found since crime data is not truly representative of all crime as many crimes go unreported due to subjective opinions of severity and pressures from interpersonal relationships and unfair power dynamics. Officer discretion in recording race and gender at the time of charging- an observational assessment- rather than self-reported data, can contribute to disparities in uniformity and accuracy. Additionally, all data collected is from the span of a year (2019-2020) and could be more effectively supported by longitudinal data over multiple years. This highlights an area of further inquiry, which can also allow for a narrower

approach to types of crime such as violent crimes and property crimes, as well as analyzing juvenile crime rates, recidivism rates, and crime rates of other counties or cities of varying populations and sizes. This can be further investigated by assessing the relationship of changes in crime rates in different cities and counties to predict the most effective solution to mitigating both the health and crime concerns of the pandemic and future social unrest. It would also be interesting to see how stay-at-home orders influenced the occurrence of cybercrimes such as online harassment, cyberstalking, and identity theft scams. Going forward, emphasis should be placed on crime prevention rather than crime control, addressing the reasons for an increase in crime rates and tackling them.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Alisha Tabag, Associate Director and Attorney at Student Legal Services, for her diligent efforts in ensuring the success of this research paper, as well as for the opportunity to partake in the University of Florida Student Legal Services Legal Research Internship. Thank you to Dr. Autumn McClellan for guiding me through the social research process in class (Methods of Social Research), and for reviewing my manuscript and helping me incorporate statistical significance in my findings.

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