

How COVID-19 Affected Divorce, Domestic Violence, and Crime

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As spring approaches, the coronavirus pandemic seems to be receding in the rearview mirror. After lockdowns and uncertainty, mask mandates and stimulus payments, vaccine development and rollout, the 2021 winter surge, the Delta variant, and Omicron, states and cities are beginning to ease restrictions and mask mandates. Thankfully, hospitalizations and deaths are trending downward. With vaccines, testing, and treatments, people will be able to freely enjoy their lives again. Although COVID-19 is still around and probably has not been eradicated, we can hope that it won't cause as much tumult in everyone's lives.

Some things will take a long time to return to normal. The coronavirus pandemic affected everyone in countless ways, putting immense pressure on marriages, finances, and mental health. In the best-case scenario, a challenge will bring out the best in us, but unfortunately, it can also bring out the worst. Lockdowns and layoffs brought some marriages to a breaking point, creating a rise in both domestic violence and divorce. Financial pressures brought a rise in crime, including but not limited to opportunists who tried to take advantage of the federal government's bailouts.

Here we look back on how COVID-19 affected three of our practice focus areas: divorce, domestic violence, and overall crime.

Pressures on Families

The [early months](#) of the pandemic resulted in increased divorce rates, not just in New Jersey but around the [world](#). Lockdowns forced couples to spend more time together, school shutdowns put more stress on families, and many strained relationships broke under the pressure. The same couples who previously went through the motions and filled their lives with distractions outside the home

suddenly found themselves constantly together, which may have confirmed that it was the end of the line for their relationships.

Yet, as lockdowns eased and it became clearer that the pandemic would become a slog rather than a sprint, divorce rates actually [ticked down](#) in 2020, including in New Jersey. Why? The uncertainty of the pandemic made many people hesitant to leave something “stable,” even if the relationship no longer brought happiness. Some anecdotes from divorce lawyers and relationship coaches also indicated that some marriages were drifting or on the rocks before the pandemic actually got better — the reality seemed to be that being stuck at home forced people to [work things out](#).

A Shadow Pandemic of Domestic Violence

From news reports and our experience at Einhorn, Barbarito, Frost & Botwinick, the pandemic magnified existing problems and forced some couples to reckon with differences that were either reconcilable or not. Unfortunately, for some people, the stress exacerbated dangerous situations at home and resulted in increased domestic violence.

As governments around the world instituted emergency lockdowns in 2020, calls to domestic violence hotlines started [spiking](#) around the world, leading the United Nations to issue an urgent call for action. Domestic violence rates increased in New Jersey even though the state was proactive in trying to prevent a rise in intimate partner abuse, according to a December 2020 report by Partners for Women and Justice and the Seton Hall Law School Center for Social Justice entitled “The Impact of COVID-19 Intensifies the Shadow Pandemic of Domestic Violence in New Jersey.”

“Calls to New Jersey domestic violence hotlines in the first four months of the year came in at rates similar to those in 2019, but then exploded after the initial stay-at-home restrictions were lifted. Meanwhile, in the first nine months of 2020, reports of domestic violence to police rose by double digit percentages in a number of cities,” the report said.

The domestic violence crisis was notably worse for people of color, especially women, according to the report.

In many ways, the pandemic was economically stratified. Many higher-earning professionals could go virtual, but lower-earning service workers faced layoffs. Financial issues such as job loss and workforce reductions, housing instability, and lack of childcare created more stress for many families, in addition to the basic premise that fewer people were leaving their homes as they were pre-pandemic. These circumstances could result in a powder keg, with an increase in the risk and incidents of domestic violence, but also making it much harder for survivors to leave abusers.

Lockdowns exacerbated isolation tactics that abusers typically employ to maintain control, including “gaslighting” and other means of emotional abuse, which created environments conducive to manipulation and coercion.

Resources were also harder to come by, or less-attractive options. Many shelters had to restrict beds to allow for safety and social distancing, straining resources available to victims in crisis and making it harder for them to leave abusers. In addition, a victim’s desire to seek protection through a restraining order may have become less ideal when facing the issues inherent in the resulting separation that would be caused during these unprecedented times.

The COVID Effect on Crime

The same economic pressures that exacerbated problems related to domestic violence also increased other types of violent crime, both nationally and in New Jersey.

While overall crime decreased in New Jersey in 2020, *violent* crime [surged](#). The trend was not surprising. Since so many people stayed home, robbery, larceny, and auto theft went down — in other words, there were fewer burglaries and less shoplifting in New Jersey because of the coronavirus pandemic. But homicides increased in 2020, and [remained elevated](#) in many New Jersey cities in 2021. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that the pandemic brought a decades-high peak in homicides across the country. Violent crimes increased everywhere, including big cities, rural areas, and everywhere in between.

The pandemic created the kind of instability that [researchers](#) anticipated would result in increased crime, especially in low-income communities with few resources to begin with, including good schools, quality housing, and childcare. The early months of the pandemic brought record waves of unemployment, resulting in economic hardship, incredible stress, and unfilled time. Lockdowns reduced basic emotional and spiritual support in communities everywhere.

Not only violent crime increased during the pandemic. The federal government's attempts to prevent economic collapse amid national lockdowns attracted [opportunists](#) who exploited gaps in the system. One study estimated that about 15% of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans — which were meant to be forgiven — were taken out fraudulently, amounting to an estimated \$76 billion in funds obtained through fraud. The speed of the program's execution created exploitable gaps. The good news is that those who sought to or did benefit unlawfully found themselves criminally charged for their conduct .

Any major crisis will bring price-gougers and counterfeiters. We all remember that people hoarded surgical masks, hand sanitizer, and toilet paper at the beginning of the pandemic and attempted to re-sell them at exorbitant prices. As the pandemic has continued, so has the profiteering, with counterfeiting becoming a subject of [warning](#) from the FDA. The government is especially concerned about fake COVID-19 tests and results, fraudulent vaccine status, and false and unproven treatments.

There is further good news. As the pandemic wanes, employment is rising and the destabilizing effects of COVID-19 are fading. We can hope to see less violent crime in our New Jersey communities. There has been considerable push from community leaders to invest more resources in underserved neighborhoods and cities to provide for improved housing, education, and training opportunities, all of which reduce crime. As for white collar crime, it's unlikely we'll ever see the end, although ideally, price-gouging on toilet paper is now a thing of the past (until the next blizzard!).