

The Impact of COVID-19 on Charleston Crime

By Amelia Orlando

The Issue:

The coronavirus has generated immense changes, from economic uncertainty, unemployment, to disruption in schooling.

Charleston has dealt with all of the changes due to the pandemic, but one matter has caught the attention of law enforcement and College of Charleston Campus police.

Parts of Charleston, including the College of Charleston campus, have experienced a fluctuation of crime rates since the start of the pandemic.

This includes changes of violent crimes and minor offenses.

Police are responding efficiently to changes throughout the city by monitoring specific crimes.

Increased Crime:

There are consistent signs that certain crimes have increased across the Nation. The biggest increase of crime since the global pandemic is violent crimes. Specifically, aggravated assault, shooting incidents, and murder.

South Carolina has experienced this as well and Police in Charleston have reported that violent crimes have doubled during the peak of the pandemic.

Naomi Boughton, a Deputy Chief for the College of Charleston campus police, has been keeping an eye on crime trends since the pandemic hit.

“I certainly think there has been an up-ticking trend for violent crime across the country. Everywhere. So, we have seen some increases in the city of Charleston not necessarily on campus, but in the city of Charleston.”

North Charleston has reported a jump in violent crimes by nearly 18% in comparison to previous years.

Numbers revealed by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division released the rate of murders increased by 25%, while aggravate assaults went up by 9% during the pandemic.

Coming into 2020, South Carolina has set an all-time record for murders. Boughton has acknowledged that aggravated assaults and robberies have managed to be a major issue since the peak of the pandemic.

Gun violence has also been an issue over the country during the pandemic.

John Ingles, a Deputy Sheriff Patrol in Charleston made it clear that gun violence has become a problem during the pandemic.

“During the pandemic, there have been a lot of issues of gun violence. Especially with younger kids. A lot of them are affiliated with gangs,” Ingles said. “Due to COVID-19, a lot of them have more free time and are out on the streets. Most of them are just bored.”

It’s not a surprise that gun violence rates will rise in Charleston, especially since throughout the country, the crime rate jumped 30% during the pandemic.

“Gun violence is the major issue that is definitely up, people don’t really have anywhere to be during the pandemic. Same principles apply to adults who are bored and especially the ones that don’t have jobs,” Ingles further explained.

Charleston’s unemployment rate is currently the lowest since the pandemic began, resting at 6.3 percent.

The pandemic has been associated with psychological distress caused by lock down orders.

“When people don’t have distractions, they get frustrated with each other and settle with each other violently.”

Firearm sales have skyrocketed at an alarming rate during the pandemic.

“Stolen firearms are still extremely common in Charleston,” Ingles said.

The coronavirus lockdown managed to create the perfect environment for domestic violence. Stress, income loss, and lack to pay for food and housing, has led to intimate violence among partners.

Charleston officers have noticed an increase of this issue, including Britney Smiley, a Public Safety Officer at the College of Charleston.

“It’s a lot of aggression. People might have an argument and go their separate ways. Now they can’t. It’s arguing and then it’s assault. People are being abused and

abusive towards other parties.”

The North Charleston Police Department has reported 1,000 domestic violence incidents occurring in 2020, with an increase of more than 40 cases from 2019.

The increase of crime rates in Charleston have also been linked to mask requirements.

“Crime increased with everyone wearing masks, because of COVID, people had their face being observed by everyone and everybody,” Boughton said.

This has become a major obstacle for police in Charleston to overcome.

“We have to work a little harder.”

A minor crime that has remained an issue through the pandemic is catalytic converter thefts.

“A catalytic converter theft involves people cutting out parts of cars. This is the part of the car with copper. People want to make easy money with metal scraping,” Ingles explained.

Incidents with car theft dramatically rose in Charleston due to people not using their cars during the pandemic. Leaving your car parked and unattended longer has allowed car theft to increase.

The numbers of car theft in South Carolina were significantly higher during the peak of the pandemic compared to following years.

Decreased Crime:

Some crime rates have been lower than usual since the pandemic hit, especially during the very beginning of the pandemic.

Lockdown restrictions managed to decrease certain crimes in Charleston and have caused them to be less of an occurrence.

During the first month of COVID-19 lockdown, crime fell 23%.

“Petty theft has decreased. This has decreased because people are not out and about. Actually, petty crimes involving businesses actually went down.” Ingles shared.

The petty crimes involving businesses include bribery, credit card fraud, embezzlement, forgery, and identity theft.

This could be due to business closures during the beginning of the pandemic and a drop in Charleston population's mobility.

Arrests for driving under the influence in South Carolina went down approximately 14% during the pandemic.

"DUI" s has definitely gone down because there are obviously less people on the road," Ingles said.

This could also be due to restaurant restrictions, which enacted them to stop serving alcohol by 11 p.m.

"It was far less common to arrest people for DUI's during this time. The restaurant rules along with people being scared to go to public places prompted them to stay indoors."

It was reported that property crimes in Charleston had dropped 6% in 2020 to the previous year.

The decline of property crimes in Charleston may be due to the coronavirus lockdowns. With people staying indoors meant fewer chances of burglaries.

Vandalism became less of an occurrence while people were locked down in their homes.

"It is a defacement of property because not everyone's opinion of art is the same, during the first year of lockdown we really didn't have that many occurrences," Boughton Said.

Campus Crime:

The College of Charleston campus has experienced a fluctuation of crime since the pandemic hit, especially due to students coming back to an empty campus.

All over the country, there was a dramatic drop in crime during the peak of the pandemic until universities resumed in-person classes.

"Students have been away for so long and this is their first taste of freedom, they are trying to pack everything into this year that they missed previous years," Smiley said.

The pandemic has caused students to feel like they have missed out on most of their college experience, now there are more reports of robbery and theft on campus.

Over the country, universities have reported an increase of burglaries by 11.2% with students coming back to campus.

As of now, larcenies and sexual assaults are one of the most common crimes that the College of Charleston faces.

“The sexual assaults to our students are probably the most serious and should bring a lot of attention. Most of our crime, over 40%, are larcenies. Stolen bicycles, stolen laptops, and purses,” Boughton said.

Vandalism reports have also jumped with an increase of tagging, broken windows, and kids exploring.

With the College of Charleston opening back up, there have been a significant increase of crime committed by non-students.

“We are getting stranger people because this is an open campus. So now you have strange people and homeless people coming back and doing things they were doing before. Now students are becoming gullible to these crimes,” Smiley said.

During the pandemic, policing campus was certainly an easier task.

“It was certainly a lot less work, students weren’t here. When you don’t have the population of people it makes the job easier. We were able to easily handle what was going on at campus, which was very little. It wasn’t very little around campus. In the city, there were still people committing crimes,” Boughton explained.

The pandemic managed to change the way campus police operated, it caused a lot of challenges that made things difficult at times.

“We had shortages of staff, officers with COVID, but we still had to respond,” Boughton said.

It balanced out, however, due to only 20 to 30% of college students being on campus during the pandemic.