The COVID-19 Pandemic and the impact on violence

— Institute for Economics and Peace

The pandemic will shift patterns of violence throughout the globe. While there has been a decline in some types of crime, battle deaths and riots due to lock-down measures, other areas such as domestic violence, self-harm and suicide are likely to have increased. There have been reports of substantially higher usage of suicide and mental health help lines as a result of the pandemic and social isolation. It is too early to tell for how long these new trends will persist, but it is likely that crime rates and riots will increase again once compulsory isolation is relaxed.

Looking at existing conflicts

As COVID-19 spread across the globe, governments imposed sweeping restrictions on movement in order to contain the pandemic. The pandemic and resulting government responses have quelled public protests in some places, while igniting them in others. Yet overall, there has been a reduction in riots and battles as a consequence of the pandemic.

The Figure below gives the trend in riots and battles recorded by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which covers most of the world except for the US, Canada and Oceania.

There has been a reduction in the number of battles and riots in the second quarter of 2020.

However, this is likely to be a short-lived phenomenon as the lockdowns are lifted and the economic downturn sets in.

Combatants in Yemen heeded the UN request, as the Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemeni Houthis halted military activities in April. This was an important step on the path towards a permanent ceasefire to end the five-year war that killed 100,000 people. Saudi forces and the Houthis had initiated tentative negotiation talks already in 2019, but the global pandemic provided impetus to an agreement. As yet, the ceasefire proposal has not been formally agreed to by the Houthi rebels.

Student groups and civil organizations in Chile called for a suspension of protests in late March, but citizens also set up road blockades in actions calling for regional lockdowns and improved safety protocols. Demonstrations also declined in Colombia and Venezuela with the imposition of lockdowns. The restrictions were imposed indefinitely in seven states in Venezuela.

Russia and Eurasia have also recorded significantly reduced activity, as restrictive measures to limit the spread of coronavirus prevented many events from taking place. Russia postponed the referendum on reforms that would allow President Putin to extend his term beyond 2024, originally set for 25 April.

Restrictions on movement may dampen protest activity globally in the short run, but political and social tensions are likely to remain through the crisis. Some may even be amplified, as frustrations compound upon losses of livelihoods and free movement. This has been seen particularly in the US with the 'Black Lives Matter' protests, which has now turned into a global movement. Worldwide, millions of people are taking to the streets to protest police brutality and social inequalities faced by people of colour, amplified by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

As the economic fall-out increases and people become more accustomed to COVID-19, it is likely that the ten-year trend of increasing demonstrations, riots and general strikes will intensify. The effects of this on political stability will be pronounced.
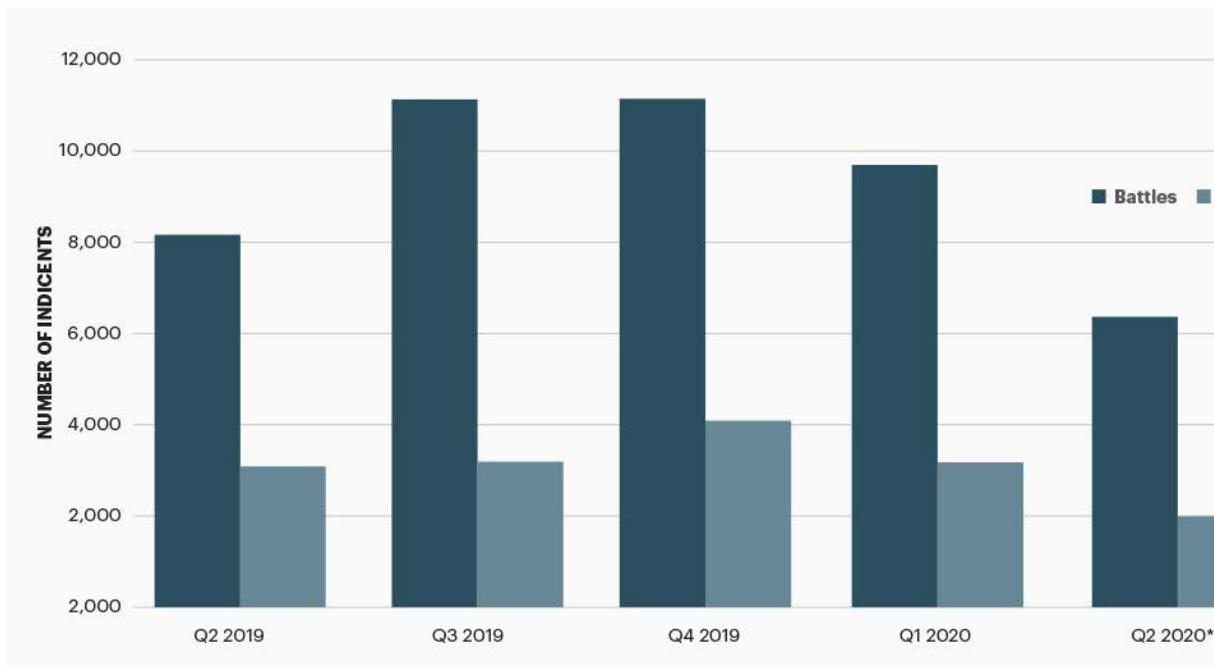
Source: IEP

Exploring patterns of violence

The short-term impact of COVID-19 on patterns of violence has been mixed. On the one hand, social isolation led to a decline in crime rates by reducing the chances of assaults, muggings, fights and other violent crimes. Drug dealing has declined in many cities around the world, with traffickers finding it harder to reach potential clients. In fact, drug gangs in the US have agreed to a ceasefire so as to keep hospital beds free for COVID-19 patients. There have also been fewer reported cases of urban brawls and car accidents. On the other hand, as mentioned, domestic violence and self-harm have reportedly risen substantially as a result of confinement and greater psychological stress.

In Latin America, the pandemic led to a consolidation of power held by drug cartels in places where the state is nearly absent. With policing diverted to monitoring social distancing in city centres and suburbs, criminal organisations in urban outskirts tightened the stranglehold on residents, at times, even enforcing epidemiological social isolation.

Some types of cybercrime may increase during the time of the pandemic. As more people – especially those less skilled and experienced on the internet – look for information or go shopping on-line, cyber criminals have increasingly sought to take advantage of the unwary. They have created fake websites to collect fraudulently information from users – an activity known as 'phishing.' Google reported a 350 per cent increase in phishing websites after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and

similar developments have been reported by other tech companies.

COVID-19 & Positive Peace

The term "Negative Peace" is used to describe an absence of violence or conflict. On the other hand, 'Positive Peace' is a term defined by IEP as the "attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies. Peace is imagined as an environment with characteristics that allow for human potential to flourish.

The current global events surrounding the COVID-19 have demonstrated the interconnectivity of societal systems, what started as a health crisis has rapidly escalated to an economic crisis. The potential for this to lead to a social crisis increases daily.

Very shortly, the community is going to need to take peace seriously. IEP's Positive Peace work provides an eight Pillar framework that

- Demonstrates that peace is more than the absence of war.
- Is constructed through statistical evidence and not based on normative values.
- Is simple for audiences to understand.

There is immense value in IEP's Positive Peace framework as it allows audiences to interpret rapidly changing complexity, understand how peace can be maintained through this crisis and how they themselves can contribute. IEP uses this framework to conduct Positive Peace activation through:

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- Publication of the GPI and the PPI with associated launches and press releases.
- Face to face Positive Peace workshops and programs including the IEP Ambassador Program with governments, practitioners and communities
- IEP's online Positive Peace Academy
- Formal education and professional development courses

IEP's work has been built up over the past decade and provides a strong evidence base for what attitudes, institutions and structures are necessary to create and sustain peaceful societies. IEP's reports and publications are available online at visionofhumanity.org ℝ

About IEP

IEP (economicsandpeace.org) is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit research institute dedicated to shifting the world's focus to peace as a positive, achievable, and tangible measure of human well-being and progress.

We achieve our goals by developing new conceptual frameworks to define peacefulness; providing metrics for measuring peace; and uncovering the relationships between peace, prosperity and the planet as well as promoting a better understanding of the cultural, economic and political factors that create peace.

IEP is best known for the Global Peace Index (GPI), an annual ranking of 163 countries on their levels of internal and external peacefulness. The GPI is considered to be the world's leading measure of international peacefulness. Our total work, which includes other initiatives such as on terrorism, achieved global media reach of 7 billion in the past 12 months. Our research and education information is also included in over 3,000 books and articles.

We have partnerships and collaborations with a wide range of academic institutions and think tanks in the field of peace and conflict studies, terrorism studies, development studies as well as economics and political science. Our work is widely used by the UN, World Bank, OECD and many other global organizations and nations.

We have offices in Sydney, New York, The Hague, Brussels, Mexico City and Harare and partners all over the world.