

Policing the pandemic – the role of enforcement in securing compliance with the coronavirus regulations

Exploring police use of enforcement powers to ensure compliance with the coronavirus regulations.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Edinburgh
Principal researcher(s)	Professor Susan McVie s.mcvie@ed.ac.uk
Police region	Scotland
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Police Scotland• Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) <p>Additional key stakeholders include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scottish Government• Scottish Police Authority• His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS)
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	March 2021
Date due for completion	June 2025

Research context

In March 2020, the Coronavirus Act 2020 provided UK police forces with unprecedented powers to enforce compliance with an extensive range of regulations.

This study will investigate:

- police use of enforcement powers to secure compliance with the coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations
- factors and vulnerabilities underlying people's inability or unwillingness to comply with the regulations
- the impact of enforcement on individuals
- risks posed to officers and the wider public

The findings will be of significant interest and value to police officers, policy makers and politicians across the UK. It will help consider how best to encourage, enable, support, or compel people to adhere to the regulations as we encounter future waves of the current pandemic, and in any future public health (or other) emergency requiring some form of mass public compliance.

Aims and research questions

The overarching aim is to investigate the role of police enforcement in securing compliance with the coronavirus regulations, and the factors associated with non-compliance.

The study will address six key research questions.

1. To what extent was the likelihood of non-compliance increased as a result of underlying inequalities, such as economic hardship, mental ill health, drug or alcohol addictions, or other forms of social or health vulnerabilities?
2. What motivations and reasons for non-compliance were given by those in breach of the regulations?
3. What factors or alternative strategies would have enabled or encouraged individuals to comply?
4. What level of risk did those who failed to comply with the regulations pose in terms of COVID-19?
5. How effective was enforcement as a mechanism for ensuring compliance with the regulations and what impact did it have on those who experienced it?
6. What lessons need to be learned in relation to the use of police enforcement in the context of a public health emergency, especially in terms of changes over time?

Research methodology

The study is mixed method and will be structured in in three stages.

Stage one

Stage one is quantitative analysis of Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) data and linked administrative data.

Stage one will draw on a unique database of FPNs issued by Police Scotland, which will be linked at an individual level to a range of health, economic and social administrative data.

To identify links between non-compliance with the regulations and vulnerabilities, such as economic and health challenges, the profile of FPN recipients will be compared to that of the Scottish adult population across a range of measures. These include socio-economic background, mental health episodes, and drug or alcohol addictions.

The project will also investigate whether COVID-19 infection and death rates amongst FPN recipients differed to those of the population as a whole and to a matched group of individuals.

This will allow the researchers to determine the extent to which those who were subject to enforcement posed a greater risk to officers and wider society, and whether policing targeted those most at risk of spreading and suffering from the disease.

Stage two

Stage two is interviews with FPN recipients.

Stage two will explore in detail the reasons for non-compliance with the regulations. A sample of around 100 people who received a FPN will be interviewed, stratified by age, sex, ethnicity, social background and geography. Interviews will explore:

- the impact of the pandemic
- attitudes to and understanding of regulations and guidelines
- attitudes to the police
- behaviours during lockdown
- circumstances surrounding issue of a FPN

- attitude towards and impact of the FPN
- factors that could have increased likelihood of compliance with the regulations

Stage three

Stage three is interviews with police officers.

The final stage will explore the actions, experiences and views of frontline police officers. About 30 police officers who issued at least one FPN will be interviewed. The interviews will explore:

- the impact of the pandemic on their policing activities
- attitudes to and ease of applying the regulations and guidelines
- perceptions of public behaviour during lockdown
- use of the four Es (Engage, Explain, Encourage and Enforce) and circumstances in which FPNs were issued
- views about the impact of issuing FPNs on people's behaviour
- factors that would have assisted the police in enabling people to comply
- reflections on the lockdown and how adherence to the regulations changed over time